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# SAREEL

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**SAREEL**



# SAREEL

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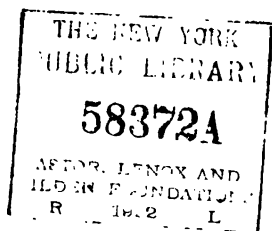


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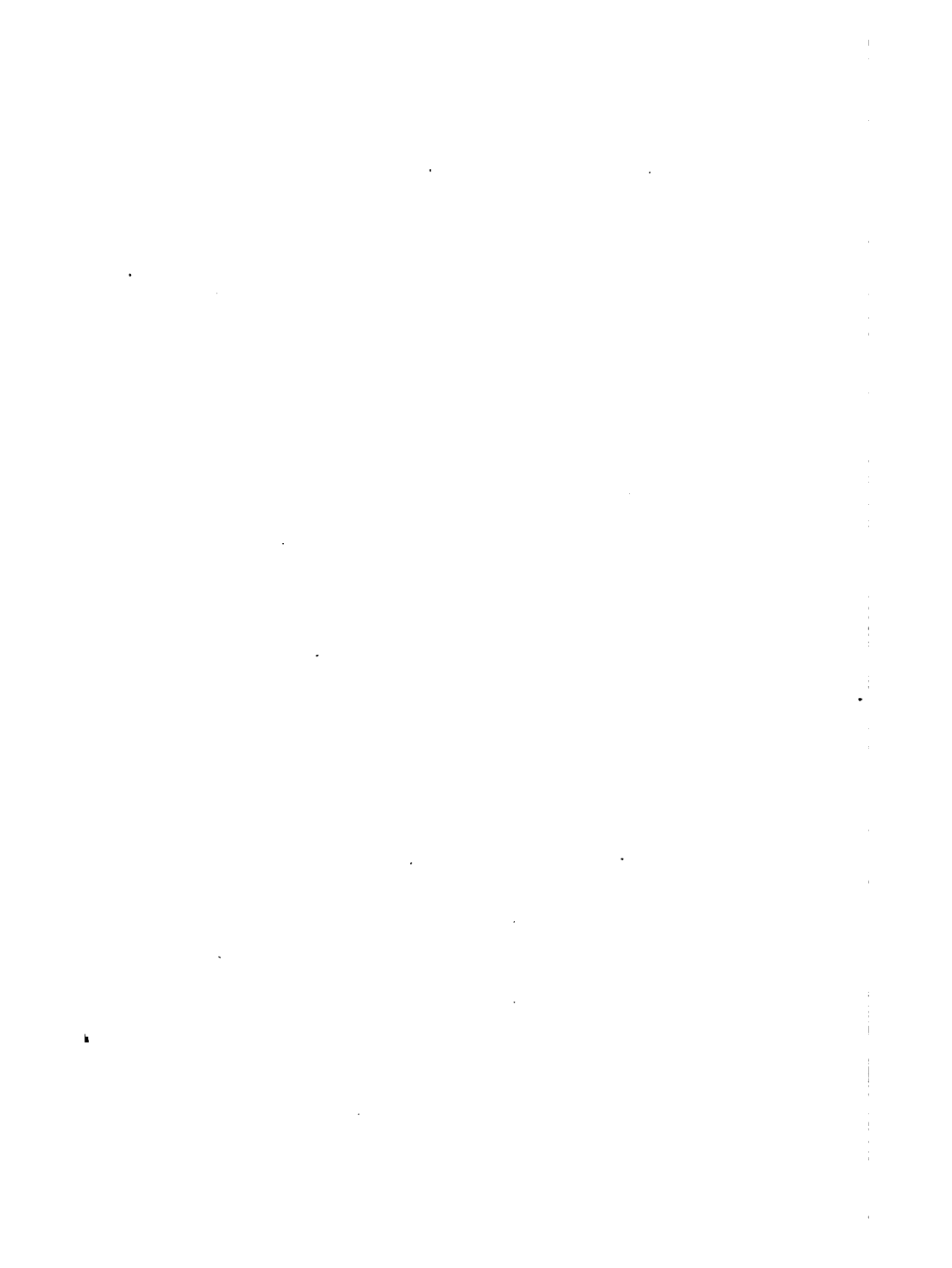


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SAREEL

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## CHAPTER I

A spring cart stood outside the long bleak front of a country workhouse. The farmer waited in obvious impatience, and at last a young girl appeared. She and an old man were carrying between them a queer little trunk covered with white and blue wall paper. It held all her worldly possessions. She was going out to her first situation. Following close behind them came a middle-aged woman, a buxom creature with a bustly energetic manner and ample proportions. The small box was lifted to the back of the cart, and the old man tied it on securely with a bit of rope. Then he nodded to the girl and hobbled away. The woman was deep in talk with the farmer. The young girl, in her ugly new frock and ill-fitting coat, stood meekly by until they had done. The man looked across at her and jerked the handle of his whip in her direction.

"Dawn't appear to be very strong by the looks of her," he said tersely.

The buxom woman shook her head decisively and stared at the girl too.

"Then you'd best not go by looks, Mr. Ashplant, for she's never had a day's illness as I know for in all her life, and I ought to be sure, seein' as I've been looking arter her this ten year and more. A better or more willing maid you'll

never get inside your door, I promise 'ee." She turned to the girl, who was flushing with embarrassment at the double scrutiny and audible discussion of herself and her powers.

The man nodded and then motioned for the girl to take her place beside him. "Best ways be startin'," he said. She moved forward, when the matron laid a hand upon her shoulder and, stooping, kissed her cheek. She did it with some solemnity, and with the air of a potentate condescending to one of the humblest of subjects. The girl's eyes filled with tears at the unexpected action.

"Now then, Sareel, mind as you be a gude maid, zay yer prayers reglar, and try and plaze your missus, mustn't be moody-hearted now. Gude-bye."

She helped her climb the high step into the cart. The mare started so quickly that the girl had no time to take her seat, but was jerked into it suddenly, and they were off. The matron stood on the top step and waved her hand; somebody fluttered something white at one of the windows that rose, row upon row, along the side of the ugly building. The girl waved her hand, her eyes were dim with tears, and there was a choking sensation in her throat that nearly strangled her words.

The entrance gates were passed, and in a few minutes they had gone out of sight of the barrack-like building that was the only home which she had ever known. She was sixteen and going out to earn her living. She would have gone six

months before, but she had been very useful in the kitchen. She had been born in that bare and unhomelike institution, and a tremor crept through her as she thought of the unknown life before her. She had heard strange stories of hard mistresses and difficult places; but it was not the memory of these tales that dismayed her young soul, as much as the terrifying idea of strangers and fresh places, new duties and unfamiliar surroundings. She choked and wiped her eyes on a stiff new handkerchief that had been one of the matron's parting gifts.

The mare swung into a steady pace, and the straggling little country town and its outlying cottages were soon left behind. For some time they journeyed in silence, the farmer was at no time a communicative man; but at length, when they had driven some miles he said abruptly:

"I 'reckon as they call 'ee a queer zort of name?"

The girl at his side flushed again timidly.

"I be called Sara Hill by rights," she replied, "but folks do most times say Sareel, and I get sort o' used to't someways."

She could pronounce her name quite correctly. A lady guardian, who had taken an interest in her, had taught her to do so; but she fell swiftly back into the vernacular with the ease of one born to it.

The farmer nodded. "Queer name," he said, and they relapsed into a long and unbroken silence.

Sareel began to look about her. The country was changing, growing wilder; great uncultivated stretches lay on either side melting away into the blue distance. They turned a corner and she caught her breath as the first real sight of the wide open moor broke upon her in great, undulating, unfettered spaces, wave upon wave of soft misty browns, merging by infinite gradations into dull purples and quivering violets, until it reached the sky line, cut into jagged and irregular curves by the jutting masses of granite and heather covered tors.

“Oh!” she gasped, unconscious that she spoke aloud, “’tis brave and gude; I niver thought as the moor was like this here.”

The man turned and looked at her, his wrinkled, weather-beaten face breaking into an expression of slow amusement as his eyes rested upon the ecstatic young face next his shoulder.

“Oh! ’tis lovely!”

He was moor born and bred himself. He had spent his life upon it, as generations of his ancestors before him. He took it for granted, grumbling at the long winters, the poor soil, the mists and bleak winds, and the countless daily difficulties of cultivation. He knew that visitors in the summer admired it and talked a great deal of nonsense about its wildness and colouring; but that a work-house maid, a being who was no better educated nor different in outlook, as he imagined, than himself, should find it beautiful stirred his

slow-working bucolic mind with infinite amusement and scorn.

"Bless the maid, 'tis zame as it always bin, I reckons. Dawn't change no ways, the old moor dawn't. You wait till you bin 'pon it as many years as me and you'll think 'tis zame as other plaaces, a plenty o' work and not much plaay 'tis hereabouts," and he smiled again as he flicked the old mare's ears with his whip and sent her back into a trot.

But Sareel was not listening to him, her eyes were fixed upon the wide prospect before them, on the great hoary granite boulders amidst the bracken fronds just beginning to untwist themselves, and the patches of heather and gorse, on the shadows of the clouds passing swiftly to and fro over the surface of the tors, and the glint of a distant stream, whose noisy course was audible far away amid the rocks and boulders of a ravine. She had seen very little natural beauty in the course of her short life. She had never even imagined that such as now lay befor her eager eyes existed. She had taken it very much for granted that the rest of the world was like the ugly surroundings in which she had been born and bred. Only in the changing sky had she seen any hint of the vision of the natural overflowing beauty of the world. It flashed upon her now in all its shimmering mystery and glory, and it was almost more than she could bear at first. For it aroused within her a response that was almost painful in its keenness and intensity.



Sara Hill, although workhouse born and bred, had not the antecedents usual in her class. Her mother had been a servant and had died unmarried at the age of seventeen the day after her child's birth. The baby had been named after her mother, Sara, and the former's life history had never been discovered. But Sara's was not peasant ancestry, and in her susceptible sensitive young soul lay depths of which she herself was unconscious, impulses that thrilled and started into being within her, as joy had leaped up in her soul at the sight of the first perfect beauty she had ever seen. It was a bleak and unbeautiful dwelling to which she was going; but to her it was to be from the first tinged with the glory of its surroundings, and as such became more than bearable.

It was a long low house, with whitewashed cob walls and a thatched roof, cowering underneath the shelter of a tor, with only a little patch of garden ground, roughly fenced in, separating it from the open land that stretched away from it on either side. On one hand there was cultivated land that had been snatched from the jealous moor in other days, when public rights were less authoritative than at present; but it was a small portion only, kept from returning to its wild state by constant toil and unremitting efforts. The granite boulders pushed through the surface everywhere, the garden was no more than a handful of earth above it, where only hardy plants and a few straggling bushes might survive. The farm build-

ing clustered about the homely old farm, squat thatched barns, with a new one, roofed hideously with corrugated iron, an innovation of which the farmer was inordinately proud.

It was an isolated dwelling with only a cottage within sight. It seemed as though at any moment the wide moor might engulf it and claim again this tiny patch of land, filched from her long ago and kept by man only at the price of constant labour. The great tors looked down as though in scorn at the puny human efforts, their shadows fell across it and passed, as they had done for uncounted ages. There was an atmosphere here of brooding and mystery, of aloofness and remote distance from all the petty affairs and tumult of man, his trivial noise, bustle, fret and fever of restless existence. It seemed to lay its hand upon you and smooth away the littleness.

Sareel felt it immediately as something big and vast, some great protecting presence that was like a watching friend, changeless and steadfast. So she entered into the new way of life, encouraged and uplifted, unafraid now and understanding.

The farmer stole a look at her as they turned into the untidy farmyard. She had been silent and motionless so long.

"Thee'll find the missus a bit short 'pon time," he said, with a tinge of deprecating encouragement in his voice; "thee musn't take too much notice of her tongue. Women folk must tell a mort, I reckons, and they dawn't always mean all what they du zay."

The old mare stopped dead, and her master flung the reins across her shoulders. Sareel got down one side and the driver the other. He helped her with her box in at the narrow door and along a bare stone-paved passage.

An elderly woman came out to meet them. She was wiping her damp hands and arms on the coarse brown apron about her waist.

"Late, bain't 'ee?" she said sharply, looking past the figure of the young girl with angry eyes directed to her husband. Then they returned to Sareel's flushing face, and she looked up and down with sharply scrutinizing glances as though she were a bale of goods or a purchased animal whose points she was appraising. She offered no word of welcome, but when her inspection was ended looked again at her husband and said to him, as though they were alone together: "Looks none too strong be half, I reckon."

"Same words as I used to matron, and her did zay as the maid never bin ill and be a rare gude worker too."

"Time 'will shaw," said the woman, unconvinced, and then she addressed her first sentence to the new-comer. "Take up yer box wan end and I'll the t'other, and up you go to tap o' all."

They went with difficulty up the narrow twisting stair that led straight from the kitchen to the next floor. The treads were uneven. Sareel was afraid of slipping, but she kept her feet as they went along a passage whose oaken floor was worm-eaten and irregular, up another even nar-

rower flight, to the long low attic that ran the whole length of the house. At each end the roof ran steeply to the floor, so that it was impossible to stand upright. Strings of onions hung here, and bunches of herbs, and apples were spread along the floor.

There was a little bed under the dormer window and a broken chair beside it. Against the door was a row of hooks.

"Ye can put yer clothes here," said Sareel's new employer, indicating them, after she had released her end of the box. "'Twill be a plenty, and if not yer box 'ull do fer the rest. Make haste now, no dawdling and wastin' yer time in this house, and so I tell 'ee from the start."

She went out and down the stairs with an agility remarkable in a woman of her age.

Sareel looked about her. She went to the window. The casement did not fasten securely; there before her stretched that beauty whose thrill at first sight still glowed within her. It would make up for a good deal to be able to look out day by day on that. She took off her ugly hat and the clumsy grey coat which the authorities had allowed the matron to purchase for her outfit, along with the distressing yellow brown frock. She slipped that off too, for it must not be worn for everyday. The matron had impressed that upon her several times. She donned a thick black serge and a new holland apron. She was not sure about wearing caps. The matron had not known if Mrs. Ashplant would require it. She had two in her

box, but in her hurry to get down she did not don one, and was relieved when no remark was made.

She went down to the great stone-paved kitchen, with its huge open fire-place and fire of logs on the hearth, above which hung on chains great pots and kettles that she was soon to find very heavy to move and fill. There was a black oak dresser, laden with crockery and winking brass candlesticks, and huge cupboards let into the wall on two sides of the room. Sareel wondered timidly if she would ever get to learn where everything was kept.

The farmer had finished tea and gone out. His wife came in now.

"Sit down and eat yourn," she said to Sareel, "and then be quick and get up fer me to shaw 'ee round the place. No wastin' time awver meals in this fambly, and so I warn 'ee."

Sareel drank the half-cold tea and tried to eat a slice of bread and butter, but she choked over it, and in fear of sitting too long she got up and cleared away almost immediately. The old woman made no comment but took her on a tour of inspection.

Sareel had been used to hard work. She knew well what scrubbing tables and stone-paved floors and passages, scouring pots and pans, whitening hearths and blackleading grates, all meant. She had much to learn, however. There was dairy work to be seen to, milk-pans and cans to be scalded, milk heated for cream, in the fashion of the district, over the slow wood fire. Sometimes peat

was used, when there was a supply at hand. Twice a week there was butter to make, on other days bread to knead and bake, and beyond that, washing and ironing. The old woman had no mercy on ignorance or failure. She had worked in her time hard and efficiently, and she expected the girl to do the same. Praise or a word of commendation was rare beyond all else; but criticism, fault finding, and rebuke were ever on her tongue.

Sareel in days to come used often to look at her withered, carelined face, with its thin grey hair, toothless jaws and furrowed brow, and wonder if that face had indeed once been as wrinkleless and smooth as her own. In the parlour, a sacred room on the other side of the house that was never used, hung a faded daguerreotype in a tarnished gilt frame—"me, when I was a maid about your age," Mrs. Ashplant had told her, and Sareel had looked more closely. It was hard to believe that the slim ringleted girl with smiling eyes could possibly have developed into the unlovely hard old woman of her knowledge. She shivered at the realisation; life seemed terrible that could transform a human being in this way.

One afternoon they were turning out the parlour; and as they worked Mrs. Ashplant, who was in an unusually loquacious mood for once, talked of the summer that was coming.

"'Twull soon be time coming around fer the visitors to begin. June they do start most years, but I've aknown 'em here in May too, so be as 'tis warm and fine then. Thee'll have to whip

round purty dapper then, me maid, and so I warn 'ee. There's a mort to do wi' more cookin' and clanin' and folks to wait on fer meals."

Sareel had not heard before that lodgers stayed at the farm in the summer.

"Us have took 'em in this twelve year and more. No need fer 'ee to stop of yer blackleadin' now to hearken, there's a gude maid."


The old woman was in a rare good humour this morning, having gotten a high price for the poultry which had been sent to market the day before. Sareel's quick hands sped at their task of black-leading the queer high grate with hobs on each side, and then began on the pierced brass fender which had to be well polished with a preparation that made Mrs. Ashplant's brass the joy of her lodgers.

Then there was the china to be washed. Sareel was fearful of this, for hands that scrub and blacklead, peel potatoes and wash greasy dishes, are not in a state for more delicate work. They were small well-shaped hands too, but as hard and rough as only coarse usage can render human flesh. She managed safely, however, and the bits of lustre and the bowls that had belonged to the old woman's mistress (for before marriage she had been in service herself) were at length all clean and shining and put back on the shelves in safety, to Sareel's infinite relief. There was not much time for thought in this life of ceaseless work. From early morning to night, there was always some task awaiting her. She rose at dawn,

and went to bed too tired for anything but to fall asleep instantly in the little bed under the sloping roof, where the stars looked in at her through the curtainless window, and the bitter wind in winter came through the badly fitting casement. Sometimes snow drifted in, and she had sometimes awakened to find the floor beside her white, and her thick shoes, put ready for rising, full of snow by her bed.

Winter was bleak and hard here, and in winter was denied her that one walk on the moor that Sunday evening yielded. In the driving mist that rolled over from the sea and shut out even the sight of the tors opposite, that filled the old house with moisture and dulled the brightness of the brasses over which Sareel laboured incessantly, there was no possibility of getting on to the moor.

It was treasure trove to the girl when one day she came upon a heap of old books in a corner of the attic. They had lain there for years, and were covered with dusty cobwebs and mouldy from the damp. She brought them to the light. It was a motley collection. But Sareel read steadily through them one after the other on Sunday evenings—the only spare time she was allowed in the course of the week. They comprised “Godolphin” by Bulwer Lytton, Mrs. Hemans’ poems, “Half Hours with the Best Authors,” and several bound volumes of the records of a Missionary Society; but at these last even the voracious literary appetite of Sareel faltered, and they were finally abandoned. A second hunt revealed an incomplete vol-





time of Shelley, Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare, and a very battered copy of "A Tale of Two Cities" with several pages missing. Shelley was a revelation to her. It opened out a new world to the workhouse-reared girl with that keen love of beauty in her soul. Of course a great deal of Shelley meant nothing to her, she could not understand it, the daring imagery and the wealth of words dazed her perceptions. But "Rarely, rarely comest thou" sang within her as she scrubbed the stone-paved floors and trimmed the evening lamps, as she mixed the fowls' food and with numbed fingers pumped in the yard earthenware pitchers full of water for the day's use. She soon knew "The Cloud" by heart, and often in the steaming depths of the back kitchen she would murmur over the wash-tub:

"From my wings are shaken the dews that waken  
The sweet buds every one,  
When rocked to rest on their mother's breast,  
As she dances about the sun."

## CHAPTER II.

The farmer laughed loud and long at her interest in the books, which he had bought years ago with an armchair at a sale in the next town. He was not a reader himself, although he liked to look at the weekly local paper every Saturday night, a literary effort unshared by his wife, who condemned outright all reading as "a waste of gude time." She went to sleep herself when her work was done; and she secretly thought Sareel what she termed "uncommon queer" for her love of the open air and her delight in books.

"Neglect her work, that's what the maid 'll come to along o' all this readin' trash. I don't 'old with sich, and never haven't done. What do a sarvant maid want wi' books, I should like fer to knaw? Let her mind her work, and du that proper vitty, and her won't want to bother up her brain wi' poring her eyesight awver print."

"Let the maid be," the farmer would submit, who was always the girl's advocate in these encounters, "her's a gude maid to her work, and why for if her du like a bit o' readin' of a Sinday night shouldn't her have it? Thee'll never get a better maid if thee lets this wan go."

"Who's a-gwine to let the maid go? I never said as her worn't a gude maid, but a fillin' up her mind wi' thic old trash is what I be agin and

always shall be. 'Tis all stuff and nonsense, and will put idears into her head as didn't ought fer to be there."

It would have puzzled the old woman still more if she could have gauged even dimly the active young brain and lively imagination of the girl whom, in moments of anger, she was wont to dub as "only a work'ous brat."

The old woman had spoken truly: Sareel's work was nearly doubled with the advent of visitors in June and a succession of them until September ended. There was more cooking and cleaning to be done, and all manner of strange offices required of her by the strangers. She waited upon the parlour, after many directions by her mistress and injunctions as to her behaviour. Sareel was shy by nature, but deft, and more than one visitor to the farm remarked upon the girl's quickness and light step, and willingness to do whatever was required of her.

"Wouldn't you like to be in better service than this, Sara?" asked a visitor one day. She had taken a great fancy to their young waitress, thinking her far too refined and fragile looking for the heavy work she had to do.

"I don't know," answered Sareel, who had never as much as thought of leaving.

"I think that I could get you a much lighter place with some friends of mine, although I am sure Mrs. Ashplant would never forgive me for taking you away," said an interested lodger who had taken a fancy to her.

"Would it be near the moor?"

"I am afraid not. It would be in London. Wouldn't you like to see London and all its sights?"

"I wouldn't like to leave the moor, somehow," said Sareel, much embarrassed at the attention directed upon her. She escaped from the room as soon as possible. She was never quite sure what might happen with ladies of determination, and for weeks after this conversation her heart sank at the sight of the postman.

"What an odd little creature," commented the visitor who had a vision of Sareel in immaculate domestic array in her sister's artistic house at Chelsea. "One would have thought she would have jumped at the mere prospect. One cannot help this sort of people because they will not help themselves."

"Why should they?" asked her cousin, who had more modern notions, and a great belief in letting other people alone to mould their own lives as they desired.

"My dear Una! of course she would be infinitely better off with Evelyn than in a rough place like this with a life of sheer toil. She told me yesterday the time she got up every morning, at a quarter to five. Imagine it! Besides, think of the money she might earn!"

"Ah! yes! Money of course," said Una, who spoke as if money were the last thing in the world worth anyone considering.

"Anyhow," she added, after an interval of

silence, "she is a beautiful young thing. Her eyes remind me of some timid wild creature, and what lashes! Something about the child, the shape of her head and the meek line of her cheek, reminds me of Titian's picture of the Presentation of the Virgin. You know the one I mean, in the Accademia of Venice?"

Her cousin laughed. She was used to Una's "idealisations" as she called them.

"I daresay. Yes, I remember it. But I really cannot see why she would not be better off with Evelyn, even if she does resemble a Titian as you suggest. I tried to get something about her out of our landlady, but she was taciturn and uncommunicative about her. I expect she suspected my motive in asking."

"Why not?" asked Una, dropping the subject suddenly as though it had lost all interest for her.

Sareel's mind was in a tumult. She was infinitely relieved when the cousins left a fortnight later. They had disturbed her peace of mind and she was never again quite at her ease in their presence. Una Field regretted this, for she had taken a fancy to her, but was quite powerless to overcome the dismaying silence and reticence of their handmaid thereafter. She left her a volume of verse, since before they had frightened away her confidence Sareel had once spoken of her love of poetry, and a frock of her own, a greyish green linen of simple make and design. It was the first ugly garment that she had ever owned, and she fingered it with keen pleasure, exploring its

soft folds and delicate colouring, wondering if she would ever have the courage to wear it and face the candid criticism that her mistress would surely pass upon it—and its wearer. There was only a broken piece of looking glass nailed against the wall of her attic. It did not tend to vanity to be able to see no more than the tip of one's nose or a small portion of brow or head at a time.

The old woman gossipped to her husband about her visitor's questions concerning Sareel.

"They'll spile the maid wi' their fulish talk and notions. If I worn't so stiff in me j'int, I'd wait on 'em all me own self and kape the maid away from the lot of 'em. Her's dapper too and strong as a young colt, and 'tis more'n I can manage to go back and forth her fashion, so 'tis."

"'Tis the willing hoss as is worked to death," said the man shortly in response; and for the rest of that week he noticed and wondered at his wife's increased scoldings and fault-findings. Nothing Sareel did was ever right, the butter was too salt, the bread baked too much or not sufficiently, the cream too thick or too thin, the dairy turned out too often or left to be a "proper disgrace."

Sareel had grown accustomed by this time to the stream of abuse and recrimination that followed her about the house and even into the farm yard. A creature of few words and unready speech herself, she marvelled at the fluency of others, and generally went her own way unaffected by it. When autumn was ended, and the last set of visitors had taken their departure, she

was glad to settle down again into the unbroken life of the farm, with its laborious daily duties and its unceasing toil but its simple, straightforward, monotonous life. The moor to her eyes looked more lovely than ever, with the bracken turned to tawny russet and dead gold under her feet, the wind singing with its shrilly note through the withered heather bells and the dun brown furze bushes with their blossoms faded to grey nothingness about their prickly stems. She had it all to herself now. There were no groups of intruders picnicking by the stream or under the great boulders in the shadow of the tor, no motors whizzing by on the road that wound like a ribbon toward the horizon. Only the wild shaggy moor ponies and the small moor sheep browsed on the short turf, scarcely moving from her as she passed with her light quick step and quiet movements. The brown purples of the distant tors faded away mistily against the vague October sky. There was a shimmering haze over their heights like a soft veil drawn close. By the river the patches of reeds and water plants had turned to yellow gold, even the mosses were growing dim and grey, like the time-worn old stones about whose feet they pressed so closely, stones hoary and steely, with delicate tracteries of lichen, gold and silver like the work of some fine-fingered smith, pattering their granite sides. The moor wind had bleached the stems of the numberless little growths that flourished in crannies and sheltered places on the upland stretch. Here and

there were bones of rabbit or stoat or bird whitening among the short grass. Sareel always turned away her eyes from these evidences of the cruelty of man and nature. She knew that it was there, merciless and pitiless, just as she knew, when she had gone beyond hearing, that the old woman of the farm followed her with invective and reproach. But instinctively she at all times turned her thoughts from ugliness to beauty.

The waggoner and his family lived in the little cottage round the bend of the lane. Sareel was often sent there with a message from the farmer. Emma Vicary, the waggoner's wife, had a deep and secret contempt for this queer young maid, who walked the moor alone in winter and never made any attempt to answer the old woman at the farm. In very busy seasons Emma was sent for to do a day's washing there, taking the youngest baby with her and leaving, in the dangerous and inevitable manner of her kind, the rest of her brood to look after one another. Dire were the threats she left behind her as to what would happen if she found evidence of mischief on her return. They were healthy chubby creatures, all except one, with lint-coloured locks and fat podgy faces that were all absurdly alike.

If she could spare time Sareel would sometimes stay and have a game with them, while Emma regarded with an indulgent smile youth that could find amuseemnt in frolic.

"Nort but a cheel yerself, I du declare. Better hold yer tongue tu Farm or, my days, you'll hear



tull oft purty fine and no mistake. Eli he du oftentimes say as he scarce knaws how you stands of't with the old missus on wi'ee mornin', noon and night."

Sareel flung back the loosened strands of hair from her eyes. Her cheeks were glowing with their game. The children clung about her, clamouring for more play. Their mother pushed them impatiently aside.

"Writin' man over to Roleigh be thrawin' the pair of cottages inter wan. Gwine to clane it all up when 'tis done. Folks thought as he'd lave now his sister is took. But it du sim as he's like you, proper mazed 'bout thic ole moor. What yu finds in it I dawn't knaw, wild and lonesome as 'tis, savin' fer a bit in summer time. Folks zay as Mr. Nugent be gwine to bide to Roleigh all 'ees time."

Emma, in spite of her residence on the moor, was an inveterate gossip and knew everything there was to be known; which in the face of her circumstances and limited opportunities seemed little short of the miraculous. Sareel took very little interest in human beings, and she replied now by a vague monosyllable which irritated Emma.

"Yu must knaw 'en. I've a sin 'en comin' tu farm fer butter and milk avore now, long and lean, wi' a pleasant manner o' spaich he hath a-got. He saith as 'ee du proper like Demshur talk."

She laughed at the absurdity of her own words.

Sareel was detaching the clutching childish hands from her skirts and apron.

"I've seen him to farm," she said over her shoulder as she hurried up the lane, with the children racing after her, leaving Emma still shouting details that were borne away by the wind.

She remembered later every detail of this hour, the children with their fluttering print aprons shouting and jumping about her, the open cottage door with the firelight dancing over the white-washed walls within; Emma, with the baby in her arms, and the last leaves from a gnarled old oak in the lane dropping in the wind, lingeringly, one by one, as though loth to leave the homely little scene. It was the first time that she had thought or heard of Robert Nugent as an individual with a home and a calling of his own. The fact dropped from her mind again as she went hurrying back to the farm in the soft blue dusk that was lengthening into velvety blackness every instant. The wind, that so often rose on the moor at nightfall and never meant a change of weather next day, whistled about her and whipped a fugitive colour into her usually pale cheeks.

She met Emma's husband half-way, going home to the bacon which she had smelt cooking over the fire. He looked a veritable part of the landscape in his earth-stained corduroys and his weather-beaten coat and hat. He called out a greeting as he passed with his heavy hobnailed tread down the road to his home. Sareel had a thought of how pleasant it must be to have a little

home of one's own, children and a man coming back after his day's labours to the comfort of the fireside. She had never known a home herself, but when she had a glimpse of one, as she had this evening, with its firelit circle and homely restfulness, the sight caught suddenly at her heart-strings. Before she turned in at the gate she cast a last look at the great mysterious moor all about her, at the soft darkness that encircled it like a protecting arm, and the jutting shadowy tor whose height seemed now mingled with the dim skies. That was home to her, and the vastness and silence of the brooding night fell upon her spirit with a sudden sense of peace and comfort; so that she went indoors to face the angry torrent of question and reproach without a tremor. It was like the wind that ruffled the short moor grass and sent flying cloud shadows racing over the brown stretch of tor. It rose and passed, and nothing was altered by its coming or going; so in these moods the old woman's wrath passed over the girl's head unresented, almost unheard. "Thee'st deaf 's a stone, it du seem," she would shout, "and proper blind eyes too." Sareel's glance would fall upon her as from some remote distance. "An't got all yer wits 'bout 'ee be my belief," her employer would retort in response to that aloof faraway gaze. "Let me catch of 'ee neglecting yer work agen and 'tis straight back to workhouse yu do go, and purty dapper too."

That shot always struck home, and the venomous old eyes would see the girl wince as at a direct

blow, and the slow flush move across her face to the roots of her thick hair. There was the same fear then clutching at her heart as when the lady visitor had suggested that she should get a new place in London. Sareel would lie long awake, trembling with the terror of that dreadful thought. To leave the moor, to be once again shut within high walls with only the sky to tell of all the beauty outside! Anything but that; she would work her fingers to the bone, suffer anything to prevent that dreaded exile from becoming reality.

The old woman would remark her added docility and industry, and chuckle to herself in secret at the success of her wily threat. She did not understand the girl in the least. Privately she thought that her brain must be a bit queer; but the girl could work with anybody, and that was all that was required of Sareel, let her be as queer as she chose so long as queerness did not interfere with nor impair her working powers. The husband would sometimes utter a mild protest, suggesting that she was a good girl and might be treated with less severity; but his words were unnoticed; only sometimes Sareel would feel a thrill of gratitude to find her pitcher filled for her, or a basket of logs or peat carried indoors. She knew that she must not remark upon this, but it was so strange to find herself considered that she sometimes wondered if she would not rather carry the heavy loads herself, than let another burden himself with the task for her sake.

### CHAPTER III.

Winter was an unusually long season that year. Hard frosts and snow storms, succeeded by heavy rain and mist, seemed loth to leave those bleak uplands, when suddenly, as so often happens in the west country, winter was ousted without warning by unclouded skies, dazzling sunlight, and that first warm breath that speaks of winter's passing more eloquently and surely than any calendar. Sareel's heart seemed to awaken with the stir of life, with the soft flutter of birds in the squat bushes by the kitchen window, with the thickening of buds on the elm trees in the sheltered lane, with the primrose tufts in the hedges, their soft crinkled leaves and pale buds peeping shyly between them in sunny corners away from the northeast winds.

The waggoner's children began once more to play out of doors, and the baby was deposed by a brother, whom Emma brought to the farm and put to sleep in one of the big clothes baskets under the back kitchen table, while she was busy at the washtub. There were many preparations afoot at the farm; for visitors were expected for Easter this year since Easter fell late. Sareel, too, washed at her side, for there was a great deal to be got through in the day, heavy quilts and blankets, bed hangings and box covers, valances and

curtains for the big mahogany four posters of the guest rooms. Emma, eager for details, pumped Sareel systematically, only to discover with deep disgust that she knew nothing about the expected visitors; she herself had not spent half an hour in the company of Mrs. Ashplant without discovering a great deal of information which she passed on to her silent companion.

"Young gentleman 'pon a reading tour."

Emma was not quite sure what that implied, but she repeated the statement impressively in the steaming depths of the wash-house, her tongue going as energetically as her large and muscular hands.

"Wull there, I always zay, give me gentlemen to du fer avore all the fine ladies as iver stepped," she concluded emphatically, out of an experience not exactly extensive.

Sareel made no reply. She knew very little about the ways and habits of either sex, and was never inclined to discuss matters of which she was ignorant. She bent over her tub and went on with her task without a word of comment or enquiry. Emma expatiated upon the topic of "young gentlemen" and their points of divergence from young ladies in the matter of requirements and criticism.

"Can't abide waitin' on they, so I can't, niver plazed, not if you was to work the flesh off yer bones along o' their old fancies and fidgets. Now gentlemen bain't usual zo fussy over l'il bits o' things as dawn't matter wan pin. They be more

careless like, and most of 'em as I've come across in me time more liberal and open 'andeder, as you med zay, where money be concerned."

Emma, disappointed at the lack of comment, became more pointedly personal.

"I reckon you gits a gude bit give 'ee, wan way and t'other, dawn't 'ee?"

She cast an enquiring glance in the other's direction, and waited this time for a direct reply.

"I was left a frock by a lady last summer," said Sareel at length, rubbing vigorously at the thick quilt, "and a book as well. I liked 'en brave and well."

"I was talkin' 'bout money. I dawn't reckon other volks cast-offs much gude, meself."

"Missus do take the money I'm gived off my wages. 'Tis only fair, her do say, seein' as I be kept to wait on the lodgers and do all as is too much fer her to manage her ownself."

"Then you do mane as you dawn't git nort extry be rights?" asked Emma with scorn.

"That's about it."

Emma looked cautiously around to make sure that they were alone together.

"I always did zay to Eli as you was a bit mazed 'bout things, and I reckons as I be purty nigh the truth, too. Why iver dawn't 'ee stand up to the ole dummon and zay out what you do think o' sich near ways of tratin' a young maid? I would, as soon as look. I'd spake it out straight to her faice."

Sareel shook her head but made no response to this declaration of war.

"Why iver not?" persisted Emma, always valiant on behalf of somebody else, but not quite so brave as her words, when the actual moment of attack came.

"I couldn't," was all the answer she could evoke, repeated several times. "No, I couldn't, was it ever so."

"Pack o' nonsense! You desarnes to be put 'pon if you can't spake fer ownself. Nobody else won't do't fer 'ee, I reckons. Proper vulish, I do call't. You, wi' no volks of yer own to spake up fer 'ee. It didn't ought to be let go on."

Sareel listened attentively, and then turned the talk with some skill into less personal channels than her own treatment and the duty of standing up for herself. She knew that she was incapable of doing this; so there was no purpose in discussing it. There was a certain inexorable directness about the mental processes of this young farm servant. She knew exactly her own weakness and limitation, and she accepted both without struggle or protest. So she listened in silence to Emma's fluency regarding her own folly and short-sightedness for her own interest and advancement.

"A purty wan yu'd be wi' a man of yer own to manage," Emma finished at length, silent only for want of breath.

Sareel smiled at the prophesy.

"All very wull to smile. I s'pose yu'll git married some day like other maidens. Though you'll



have yer work cut out to get a man, wi' the ole missus so sot agin courtin' or swateheartin' and the like."

"I'd need to get the sweetheart first," said Sareel, who was a little tired of the topic of herself.

The woman cast a look at the young face bending over the washtub. The loose ends of chestnut hair curled tightly in rings about the small ears and the smooth white brow. The dark lashes that hid the grey eyes cast a light shadow on the healthy pallor of Sareel's rounded cheeks. Her throat, where the collar of her coarse frock did not reach, and her arms, bare past the elbows, were as white as milk. Even Emma, whose canons of beauty were of a somewhat primitive nature, could not mistake the appeal and grace of that winsome young face, the unconscious beauty of its delicate strength and purity. Women of her class do not speak to one another of these things, and, in spite of her usual loquacity, she kept silence now. But she thought, as she carried out a heavy basket of wet clothes with Sareel at the other handle, that it would not be much effort for a girl with a face like that to get a sweetheart of her own.

They hung up the flapping sheets and blankets together. The lissom young figure, slender as a willow along the stream and as strong as a beech sapling for all its slenderness, was displayed to great advantage against the bulging outline of the matronly Emma as she pegged the big blankets

on the line. Sareel pushed up the line with a forked pole. She liked the feel of the breeze against her face, hot and tired after hours in the steaming wash-house. She had been up at day-break with the prospect of this work before her. She looked across the valley beyond the stream to the heights of Crown Tor, every boulder and bush standing out clearly in the keen midday atmosphere. There were sheep cropping the grass on its side. She thought what she would give to be there, too, lying on the sun-warmed turf under the wide sky, with no dishes to wash, no dairy pans to scald, no wash-house to be cleaned up, no meals to prepare and put away. Then she put the dream away from her resolutely, and went back to help Emma in the wash-house with the rest of the heavy work.

It was done at length, and when Emma and the baby had taken their departure Sareel went out to take in the clothes. They were dry now and smelling of the sweet fresh air of the open moor. She liked clean things, and her fingers lingered over the folds of the blankets and quilts as she took them down. The sunlight had gone now, and grey clouds were slipping up from the west, but still a soft amber glow suffused the evening sky and lay softly over the distance like a caress. There came faintly to her ears the sounds of children's voices carried by the clear air; and from the house behind came the fragrance of peat smoke. A reflection from the evening sky rested on her own face as she carried the heavy clothes-basket

indoors. The house was very quiet in the evening hour. The farmer and his wife had driven to market and had not yet returned. Sareel laid their tea in readiness and put the kettle over the fire.

She began to sing to herself as she moved to and fro over the stone flags of the shadowy, low-ceilinged kitchen, where the firelight cast strange wavering reflections of her slender form over the walls. The tabby cat by the fire was washing herself with the grave deliberation of her kind. Sareel put down a saucer of milk for her, which was not allowed in the front kitchen. The cat lapped it leisurely, stopping now and then to continue her toilet. Going out at the back Sareel started, for a man's figure stood among the shadows of the dusk. It was the man of whom Emma had spoken yesterday, and he had come for eggs and butter. He stepped into the kitchen while she went to get what he wanted.

He was a tall lean man, no longer young, with a stoop to his shoulders that spoke of a sedentary life, and brown eyes that were grave and whimsically bright by turns. He liked to wait in the firelight of the dusky old room, where brass and copper utensils caught the flames and flung them back again, and the outlines of the black oak dresser faded away in the twilight with only the shining of a dish or plate-rim on its shelves betraying its whereabouts. Robert Nugent was a man of simple tastes, and because it was eloquent of homely use and fitness the old room

had an instant appeal for him. He had cast behind him most of the conventions and habits of his class, and come to live in a cottage near by, as Emma had discovered. He was a man who had seen a good deal of the world and had come back at last to the primitive simplicity which suited him. Sareel thought he looked very big and strong standing there, leaning against the side of the settle, when she came back with his basket filled. His eyes followed her as she moved across the room to find change for his payment. He was thinking that she was not at all the buxom stolid type one would expect to find in these surroundings, and he wondered vaguely with his natural interest in his fellow beings how she fitted here, and if there was anything in her temperament that matched the wistfulness of her look and her shy appealing eyes. They exchanged a few brief phrases and then he left, swallowed up in the darkness of the lane.

A few steps from the gate he stopped to light his pipe, and Sareel stood watching its tiny red glow shine up the lane and across the road that led over the moor to Roleigh. He spoke, she thought, with the same agreeable accent as the visitor who had given her the linen frock. She remembered that Emma had said he loved the moor. She envied him suddenly for his freedom to come and go as he would about it, his liberty of action and independence. And then a strange longing took her by the throat with suffocating intensity, a longing that she too might be free

some day; but even as it trembled through her mind she put it from her. The sound of distant wheels came to her ears. She went indoors and lighted the lamp to guide them home. A few minutes later the farmer and his wife drove in at the yard, and she went out to help her mistress alight.

"Got the clothes all in?" the old woman asked sharply as she got down. "I shall soon see if you bin scampin' yer work, so bein' as you bin left to yerself fer wance. Can't trust maidens fer long these days. Dawn't know what they be all a-comin' tu."

Sareel made no answer but busied herself over making the tea. The peace, that had been like a friendly presence in the old room only a short time ago, was all dispelled now. The tabby cat was driven away from the fire and sat at a distance regarding its eyictor with dignified resentment.

It was only in action that any relief was to be found from that ceaseless upbraiding tongue. While husband and wife were having tea Sareel went out to the back kitchen and began to mangle the clothes that she had intended to leave until next day. Through the small window that looked out on the moor the stars were visible, one hung like a jewel over the peak of Crown Tor. The great stretch of sky was powdered with constellations. Sareel's heart was uplifted at the sight. They were not distant worlds or conjectural spheres to her, only an added beauty and wonder to the mystery of the night, looking down on the

changeless moor as they have looked for countless generations of ages and æons of time. She thought of Emma who said, "I can't a-bear to look at the stars, they du make me feel so small like, someways." Sareel did not give much thought to the paltriness of humanity; her outlook was rather on the vastness and profundity of nature. She was comforted now and she made her task as lengthy as possible in spite of the discomfort of the back kitchen. She was happier here than in the firelit circle of the next room, an object for discussion and recrimination and that endless monologue that never failed. She wondered why people talked so much. Her own instinct was reticence. There was Emma who talked incessantly from waking to sleeping again; even when there was only the baby to listen to her she talked just as much as ever. How strange it all was!

## CHAPTER IV

They came to the farm the Thursday before Easter, the expected party of "young gentlemen" prefigured by Emma. They were a lively trio, and Sareel thought when she first entered the room with her tray that she had stepped straight into a new world. There were papers, books, pipes, coats and hats flung all about the room, while three strangers were to be discerned through a haze of tobacco smoke in various attitudes of abandonment. One had his feet on the mantelpiece, among the lustre jugs and a glass case with wax fruits that was one of their landlady's most cherished possessions. A second lay full length on the wide sofa, while the third sat on the window sill with his body outside and his long legs in. They were talking all at once, laughing and chaffing one another in a language that might have been a foreign tongue for all the girl, laying the cloth with quick nervous hands, understood. She was glad to get her task done and escape from the room to the cooking of the evening meal that entailed so much added labour to herself. The old mistress hovered about her, giving instructions, finding fault, getting in the way. It was a warm evening and their waitress's face was flushed with her exertions over the fire when half an hour later she carried in dinner. The tray

was laden, and as she entered one of the three got up and took it from her, saying, "I say! It is a weight, that!"

The meal had cost her much effort, and it was a relief to realise that it was a success, the chicken and bacon cooked to a turn, the apple pie and cream appreciated. It all disappeared, and when she went in to clear she was glad to find the room empty, the diners having gone out for an after-dinner stroll.

The days that followed were laborious ones for Sareel. Though the visitors were out all day, from breakfast to dinner, there was a luncheon basket to pack and an evening meal to prepare and cook—things which the party naturally accepted as a matter of course. They brought an air of liveliness and youth to the quiet old house, running up and down stairs, shouting to one another from landing to landing, laughing and whistling and having tussles in the passages in a ridiculously youthful fashion. They took prodigious walks, and sometimes of an evening would come out to the kitchen and talk over their next day's excursion with the farmer, who knew every inch of the moor and the best tracks and paths everywhere. They would bring out innumerable maps and guide books, of which the good man had a boundless scorn, born of complete ignorance. Sareel would make her escape when possible on these occasions.

She had lost something of her first paralysing shyness with these strange young beings, over-



flowing with life and spirits and yet so oddly polite and considerate of herself. If only they had ignored her she would have been so much happier. She was used to carrying heavy loads, but quite unaccustomed to having them taken from her by strong insistent hands. She knew that her mistress was angry when trays were brought into the kitchen not by their lawful bearer but by one of the visitors. What was she to do, a tongue-tied timid young creature like herself, against these authoritative young men with their wrists of steel and their unwelcome gallantry? Daily they made efforts to draw her out in conversation. It was a disappointing process.

"I say, let's try one at a time. You shut up, you other fellows. As soon as she's on the verge of a statement one of you is sure to chip in and frighten the life out of the child."

It was the trio that disconcerted Sareel. With one at a time she could venture a brief sentence, but with the whole company, with six eyes looking at her in smiling mockery, and three masculine faces laughing up at her it was impossible. She could only turn and flee from the scene of her discomfort, with flushing cheeks and heaving breast, and a deep anger within her at her own stupidity and fear.

"What can you expect of a girl living in this desolate place? She is like one of the moor ponies with their shy eyes and tossing manes," said Allan Liddle, the youngest of the party. "Let her alone. It is too bad to frighten her like this."

Anyhow, she looks after the lot of us jolly well, and from the look of her the old woman is a bit of a tartar. I heard her ragging the girl no end yesterday, and not a word did she answer back. I thought it jolly fine."

"Allie, the champion of beauty in distress!" mocked another. "Why didn't you go in and rescue her from the dragon?"

The first speaker flushed in a quick girlish way.

"Because I thought it would only make things worse for her if I did interfere," he said quietly, but the long fingers striking a match shook slightly at their task, and the man watching shrugged his shoulders and exchanged glances with the third and so far silent one of the trio.

Jim Underhill and Allan Liddle were friends. Dick Paget, who had twitted Allan, had only joined the party at the last moment and was not particularly sympathetic to Allan. They were constantly getting on one another's nerves, and Jim, for the hundredth time since they had come, cursed his own short-sighted folly in suggesting Paget's joining them. He was devoted to Allan himself; but he knew him as thin-skinned and sensitive to criticism, the very type that a coarser man like Paget would fail to understand and delight in baiting. Allan Liddle was the youngest of the three, an impressionable, attractive youth with the sort of manners and charm with which most women are soon at ease. Yet he was fastidious to a fault, and his friend, watching him for signs of disgust at the occasional lapses in good

taste of Paget, felt that they were living on the edge of a volcano.

Allan Liddle was such "a pretty boy," as Paget had once contemptuously described him. There was a certain grace about the easy slender lines of his figure unusual in an Englishman, a curve in the sensitively cut lips and the lines of the fine head, under its tumbled masses of wavy dark hair, that might suggest the feminine to a casual observer, and had brought upon their owner at school, and later at college, the girlish nickname "Allie."

Underhill noticed, after their talk about the girl who waited upon them, that Allan never mentioned her again, was rarely the one to jump to his feet and relieve her of a heavy tray or open the door; that he in fact ignored her as far as possible, and he guessed that the reason of this avoidance lay in his dislike of Paget's attitude toward her. He knew that the lad was responsive enough to a feminine atmosphere wherever he encountered it, and had not a trace of snobbishness in his composition. The Liddles were modern folk, and had been reared by modern independent methods, curiously untouched by the vulgarizing processes of money or class. They possessed enough of the former to be able to ignore it, and as to the latter they set it deliberately aside, "like the shape of one's nose," as Allan's twin sister had once put it to Underhill in the course of one of their interminable arguments. Perhaps it was because of Lois Liddle and all that she meant to

him that Jim Underhill was growing to understand her twin brother, and to care for him. "Elder brotherly," Allan called his care of him; but Jim had been thanked sufficiently by the look in the frank brown eyes of Lois, eyes at once so like to and so different from those of her brother.

It was almost a relief when the end of the fortnight came within sight. The weather had been glorious, an unusual happening so early in the year upon this exposed upland. No bad weather had hindered their long walks, and they had explored the district on foot from end to end. Paget left the farm the day before the other two were to go. They walked with him part of his way. Allan took a deep breath when he had gone and they turned and came back together. Underhill flung an arm about his shoulder, an action that he would never have dreamed of risking in Paget's mocking presence.

"It tests a man, this sort of place," he began musingly, his eyes on the great purpling sweep of undulating country that went in wave upon wave of shimmering misty colour to the skyline where, palpitating, it merged into the faint blueness of the sky.

"It makes the big things bigger, and the small smaller," said Allan after a pause, and it was the only comment either made on the fiasco that Paget's advent had been.

It was coming down the valley toward the farm that Allan slipped against a loose stone hidden in the grass, and, falling, cut his wrist on the jagged

edges of a boulder. It was a slight accident, and they went on after a rest of ten minutes. Jim had bound his handkerchief about his friend's wrist, who made light of the whole occurrence, but when they got indoors he stumbled across the room on to the couch and flopped forward suddenly.

Sareel, preparing the evening meal in the kitchen, looked up to find Underhill at her elbow.

"Can you give me some water quickly, please? I think my friend has fainted," and he was gone again.

She followed rapidly. He took the jug from her hand and flung a part of its contents over the white unconscious face against the faded old needlework cushions of the couch.

"Open the window wider. He must have air," he urged.

Sareel set the casement as wide as it would go. Her own heart was beating unsteadily at the sight of that immobile, pallid face, where the dark motionless lashes lay so black and still. She knew nothing about illness. She was afraid of it, as of all unknown experiences. Underhill unfastened the flannel collar and unknotted the silk tie. Sareel noticed mechanically the difference between that sunburnt throat and the soft whiteness of neck and chest.

"Can't I get him brandy?" she asked. "I think Mrs. Ashplant has some in the house."

Underhill nodded.

"Please, but in my room there is a flask, on the table in the window."

She was out of the room and upstairs in a flash, and down again before he realised that she had gone. He poured from the gurgling flask into the glass she held, and forced some of the brandy between Allan's lips. Allan shivered, his eyelids quivered, and he opened his eyes on them. The girl watching with quickened pulse thought that they were the darkest and most velvety eyes that she had ever seen. He laughed a little unsteadily and sat up, pushing back the damp hair from his brow.

"What on earth? You've been drowning me, Jim, you wretch, or trying to. Did I go off? I do occasionally in a weak way. I'm right again now, thanks," and he looked past his friend at the face of the girl behind him and smiled encouragingly, for he saw that she was startled. "It's nothing really, only a silly girlish trick that I have had since I was a kid. Nobody thinks anything of it at home. It was the sight of blood just now," and he held up his bound wrist. "I ought to be kicked for being such a feeble ass."

Underhill relieved his feelings by filling his pipe. Sarell slipped out and came back with a bowl of water, a roll of old linen, and a pair of scissors.

"I'll do it up for 'ee better than that," she said, kneeling down by the sofa and unfastening the blood-stained handkerchief knotted so tightly that for some minutes it resisted her capable little hands. Underhill had strolled out into the garden. The last rays of the setting sun came in at

the west window and made a halo of shimmering glory about the chestnut head, bent low over its task. The boy watched it as she bathed and bandaged the cut with deft swift fingers, and not one unnecessary word.

"I say, what ripping hair yours is," he said with a laugh when she had finished. "Thanks awfully; sorry to give you all this bother about a silly scratch."

"It is nothing to du," said Sareel in her low, quiet voice. She had flushed hotly at his remark about her hair. She got up and would have gone, but Allan held out a protesting hand.

"You are always in such a confounded hurry," he said in a voice as quiet as her own, but with a new note of urgency about its low tones. "Dinner can wait a bit surely for once. Don't you ever do anything but slave and cook and clean?"

His eyes were on the broad grey-coated back of Underhill outside. The room was full of the soft evening light growing fainter every instant now, that magic light that transforms all it touches into fleeting beauty. It lingered now about the gleaming masses of the girl's head and was reflected back by the faded gilt frames and the polished surfaces about the room.

"You must have a rotten dull life of it," he said, as she did not reply.

She laughed then, a little laugh of negation.

"No," she said timidly, "I have something else beside work; there's always the moor, you see, there outside, a sort of friend it du seem now. I

can't just say how it is somehow. . . . It's big and friendly and never alters much." Her voice stumbled here and failed. "I can't explain of it," she ended lamely, and taking up the bowl of water and the discarded handkerchief she went out.

Underhill came back after a short time and sat down in the big chair opposite the couch.

"You did give me a bit of a scare, old son," he said shortly; "I've never seen you crumple up like that before."

"Hasn't Lois told you about me? She seems to have revealed most of my other weaknesses. You needn't worry, really. It's nothing. Lois wouldn't be the least bit disturbed."

He shut his eyes again, thinking how oddly of late he had grown into the habit of always talking about Lois to his friend.

When dinner was ready, and Sareel brought in the lighted lamp, he was quite cheerful again, and laughed and talked more than usual during the meal. They had taught her how to make coffee. She brought it in now, and thick cream in a little brown jug.

"You might have put three cups as usual, and then had some with us yourself," said Underhill unexpectedly. "Don't you ever make enough for yourself when you are about it?"

Allan was quite silent, watching her.

She shook her head.

"Oh, no, never, sir."

He winced at that "sir" that had been so care-



fully instilled by the old mistress' repeated injunctions.

"Why not?" asked his friend, tilting back his chair against the wall, and watching her too under his half-shut lids. He thought how to-night the barriers of constraint had all fallen between them, and wondered what had brought this about—Paget's absence or Allan's fainting attack?

"Why not?" he repeated insistently; "why ever not?"

"It wouldn't be right," she answered slowly; "besides——"

Underhill laughed comprehendingly, and nodded toward the kitchen.

"I suppose the old dragon wouldn't allow it, eh?"

He liked her quick ringing laugh, and the way her face changed, losing for the instant all its shrinking timidity, and aloofness, becoming human, womanly and very beautiful in the lamplit circle wherein she moved, putting the sugar basin on the table and the biscuits. She seemed suddenly in no hurry to-night, and they held her with question and talk; but later Allan could not remember anything that had been said. He sat rolling cigarettes which he did not attempt to smoke, and evolving in his brain, still a little excited and unsteady, that brief statement that she had made to him an hour before: "There's always the moor you see outside. . . . I can't just say how it is somehow. . . . It's big and friendly and never alters much." The words went over and over

stumblingly in his brain, mechanically, uncertainly, and with them an inconsequent recollection of how, when she had rolled up her sleeves in order to bathe his wrist, he saw that the work-roughened, stained and hardened skin was white as milk and delicately fine in grain halfway up the girl's arm. He had wanted to touch it then. Some pulse beat faster in his throat now at the thought of its rounded whiteness; soft he knew it would be, soft as snow or a flower's petals. What would she have done if he had followed his impulse? Would she have shrunk away from him with the old timidity and fear leaping up in her grey eyes, as still now and undisturbed as some pools they had come upon only this morning lying quiet and rippleless between the sheltering hills under the grey sky? Who and what was she, this unpleasant-like young creature, with her limpid eyes and small, deft, rough hands?

They heard the old woman's harsh voice calling her imperiously and Sareel heard it too. She cast a half-smile at them as she hurried out of the room in answer to that angry continued summons.

"Rough luck for the poor little kid to have to serve an inconsiderate beast of a woman like that. I wonder she stands it. She's got a head on her, too. You should have seen the way she fled upstairs and down again in less time than it takes to tell for my flask."

Allan listened in moody silence, tracing, with lowered eyes, patterns on the tablecloth with a

silver pencil case. His friend shot keen glances across at him between his own talk.

"You've been overdoing it. I don't know what Lois will say to me for letting you walk so far and fag yourself out like this. I didn't realise —,"

"Don't fuss like a confounded old woman," broke out his friend in accents of irritation. "Lois or no Lois I am not going to be nagged into coddling myself, and now you know it," and, getting up from the table, he pushed back his chair impatiently, and went out of the room into the night.

Underhill suppressed his first thought of going after him, and, taking up a book, lit another pipe and plunged into his study.

In the kitchen Sareel was listening to the usual harangue.

"Ought to be ashamed of yersel, a maiden of yer age a dawdlin' and a kapin' of things about this time o' night. There, I suppose a workhouse maiden, and not respectable born nayther, can't be expected to know what's daycint behaviour wi' young gentlemen and what baint. I'll put a stop to sich goings on, that I wull, avore I get another lot of visitors here. I'll see if I be going to be defied be a young maiden like you and under me own roof, too."

The girl made no answer. She scarcely heard, in fact. When at last the dishes and plates were all washed, the kettles filled for the morning and the kindling sticks put ready, she took her weary way to bed. She was very tired to-night. It had

been a hard day with the dairy and butter-making.

It was a dark moonless night. She could only just discern the great dim outline of the tor jutting up against the dimmer sky. The sweet vague earth scents of spring floated up to her, the fragrance of grass and herb and bursting resinous branch. An owl went by with its dreary mournful cry, and behind in the stable an animal stamped and pulled at its chain.

A step crunched the stony path leading to the garden. She saw the circle of light from the lamplit parlour lying on the white-washed wall that ran at right angles to the house. There came the echo of voices, and then silence. Before she fell into a dreamless sleep she heard one of those voices saying again in low tense tones, "I say, what ripping hair yours is!" and the thrill at her heart that had responded to those words stirred again in her like pain and yet like something that was far away from pain. She was glad that she had always washed her hair every Saturday night in spite of the old woman's jeers and mockery. "Workhouse claneness," she dubbed it, as well as the girl's habit of having a bath in one of the wooden washtubs in the chilly back kitchen winter and summer alike. She had kept her self-respect that way. Emma made a mockery, too, of her queer habits, and said she was just like "that there Mr. Nugent over to Roleigh, wash the flesh off his bones so he would avore he had done, proper vulishness, 'ees vay!"

The visitors were gone in the morning. The

farmer drove their luggage to the station and they walked the six miles. The house was very silent without them. Sareel was folding up the best maroon patterned tablecloth in preparation for disuse when a shadow fell across her, and looking up she saw Allan Liddle, breathless with his haste, looking in at her.

"I forgot my pipe," he said hurriedly; "there, on the mantelshelf."

She got it, and he took it through the open window. His hand closed over hers for an instant—the merest second.

"I am awfully sorry to go," he said, with a tinge of embarrassment in his pleasant cultured voice; "some other holiday I hope we'll come again, and you'll be here still."

He was gone again. She watched his long strides over the moor in the direction of the station. The early brightness of the day was waning and grey rain clouds hung lower than the tops. Then she started, for her mistress had entered the room.

"What did they give 'ee?" she asked curiously; "a brave and gude present most like, free' wi' their money young gentlemen most times be."

"I haven't touched it," said Sareel shortly, with a sudden lift of her head. "It's there agin your hand."

The wrinkled old fingers tightened upon the coins, as she counted them jealously one by one. Then she slipped them into the pocket of her grey linsey skirt.

“ ‘Tis all wan, if I takes 'em now I needn't take 'em off yer wage the end o' the month, makes no diff'rence in the end.”

They had paid her lavishly, and she was in a good humour in consequence.

Sareel kept silence. She had felt the same overpowering distaste in taking this money as the giver had in offering it. He had put it down without a word, and she would have left it there untouched, from some unexplained instinct of reluctance, had not other hands taken it away.

“ A body would think as you'd be plazed yer work is less agen', sted o' that you look as though you'd lost a shilling and picked up sixpence.”

It was a favourite metaphor with one who loved gain.

Sareel made no reply, but worked, if such were possible, harder and more incessantly than before. She was restless with a new and unwelcome stir in her blood. Only on the moor was her restlessness appeased, her beating pulses quieted and her heart again awhile at peace. She would fling herself full length on the warm grass, and look up at the great spaces of aerial blue overhead, where white galleons of clouds went floating by in stately procession, or the quivering vault was one unbroken space of ethereal unclouded colour, bodiless and translucent. She emptied her tired brain of thought, as a child overturns a pail in the stream and lets the rushing waters overflow it on their passage to the sea.

The wild thyme crushed beneath her body sent

up its sweetness to mingle with the warm nutty scent of the gorse blossom, and the honeyed fragrance of the heather bells. She was happy then and only then, with her heart emptied of this new unrest, for a time at one with the peace and beauty all about her. She had known unhappiness before, blank misery and loneliness, despair and cruelty, hardship and misunderstanding; but never before this strange restlessness and expectancy, this sense of waiting day after day, for whom and what she did not know and could not have told had she asked herself the pregnant question and set her mind to the truthful answering. She only knew that life was altered for her, and she chafed against the change, as natures faithful as her own will always chafe, until they know the meaning of the alteration and grow to it as a plant to a training stick. She did not know except that she was afraid now of herself, her own heart, her future, when once she had only been afraid of change and exile from her beloved moor.

## CHAPTER V

It was a hot summer on the moor that year, hotter than even the oldest moor dweller could remember. The sun blazed down fiercely so that the short grass was shrivelled brown early in July, and the gorse blooms burnt and withered as soon as their yellow flowers appeared. The stream sank to a tiny crawling thread between its granite rocks, and the deepest part was shallow enough to wade across. The ponies came to it for drink, forgetting their native shyness in their thirst.

Sareel, who had always loved the sun, hated now its burning relentlessness that penetrated even through the thick cob walls and thatched roof of the old farm, that was generally cool even in the hottest weather. The dairy work was difficult, and had to be done either at dawn or after nightfall. Sareel grew pale and hollow-eyed. She was too tired to sleep when she crawled upstairs to the suffocating attic. Only weary limbs that refused to go further kept her under a roof on these breathless nights when not a leaf stirred and the faint cool wind rose only to die away again, leaving the parched earth unrefreshed to await the brazen sky of dawn. The moor seemed to palpitate with heat, and the great brown sides of the tor were as bare of growth and vegetation as the desert, burnt to the grey granite structure of it,



the thin layers of earth cracked into fissures like wounded flesh that opens to the bone.

It was toward the end of July that a letter came to the farm from Allan Liddle, asking if it could accommodate him and his friend for a fortnight in August. The old woman passed the letter to her husband, shaking her head.

"Folks did ought fer to spake earlier 'bout rooms. I reckons as us'll be bound to refuse 'em."

Sareel instinctively guessed the writer of the letter, although she had never seen Allan Liddle's writing. Her heart gave a great throb as she realized that her guess was correct, and then sank to unimaginable depths at the cruel thought that they could not take him in.

Letters were never answered without much deliberation by Mrs. Ashplant. She talked all day loud and long of the folly of people who thought she could give them lodgings at a few days' notice "thickey vashion." Then the miracle happened, straight from heaven, as it seemed to the girl.

Sareel was on her knees scrubbing the front passage, when the telegraph boy stuck his bicycle against the wall and came whistling up the path. She took the orange envelope in her damp fingers and carried it to the kitchen.

"I ain't got me glasses downstairs. You read 'en," commanded Mrs. Ashplant abruptly. "Twull most-like be from Miss Franklin."

Sareel read the short phrases.

"Family bereavement, unable to come next week. Letter follows. Franklin."

"No answer," she called to the waiting boy, who picked a bit of southern wood from the bush by the door and went off whistling.

"Then us can write to Mr. Liddle and zay as rooms be free fer 'en. But t'others wull be made to pay sommut fer crying off these ways. I'll make 'en pay sommut as 'tis only fair they should."

Sareel did not hear her mumbling over her bread and cheese and mug of cider. She went out to the pump in the cobble stone-paved yard to fetch a pail of water. But she could not for a moment find her breath. She watched the green mosses that clung to the edge of the old granite trough. She began to pump, the stream of water splashed over the trough and trickled across the stones. She had forgotten to put the pail to catch it, she had forgotten everything for the moment but the news that sang in her heart like a song, just that one word over and over, "Coming, coming, coming!"

The sun was striking warm on her hatless head, even the pump handle was sun-warmed too to her touch. She pushed back the hair from her eyes and looked up beyond the tops of the tall elm tree in the lane outside. There was a hawk hanging against the burning blue, a mere speck in the quivering distance. Men were beginning harvest in the field down the lane, she heard their shouts to the horses and each other, and she remembered

that it was time she cut the bread and cheese for their lunch. The boy would come to fetch it in a minute. She lifted the brimming pail, the water slopped over with a gurgle as she moved toward the house. Nothing mattered now, not the heat nor the long tiring hours of labour, the stifling room under the roof, nor the countless things that had to be seen to when the present set of lodgers moved out next day and the rooms were got ready for the next.

"Best ax Emma to come and wash fer 'ee," suggested the mistress in an amiable mood induced by the idea of getting double payment for her rooms. "There's a mort to be done these next few days."

"I can manage, no need to have Emma," said Sareel quickly, with a sudden leaping jealousy that other hands than her own should prepare for that future that almost dazzled her with its intoxicating good fortune. "I'll be up a bit earlier and begin afore I du ought else, reckon the washing won't take me all the mornin' to get dro."

The listener nodded agreement, quite content to save extra labour that would mean extra cost, and Sareel rose at three and had got the washing finished and hanging out in the sun long before the rest of the house was awake.

Even the woman who criticised and found fault with her daily had no words of grudging bitterness through the busy hours of the next week. It is doubtful if Sareel would have heard them had

they been spoken. She was scarcely conscious of the earth beneath her feet or the sky above her head. She lived in a happy dream, in which she worked with swift unerring fingers and feet that seemed to tread on air. The keen old eyes watching her wondered at her sureness and rapidity, but since these were both displayed in her own service they went unremarked and unthanked.

Emma, coming one evening to the back door, gazed on her in open-eyed astonishment.

"What bin doing to yerself? Why last week ye was lookin' like a pound of taller candles left out in the zin and now yu sims to be as dapper as a cheel."

"It isn't because I've been lazy, then," said Sareel, reddening a little under that close scrutiny. "I can't stay now; there's a deal to be done yet avore the morrow."

Emma snorted scornfully, more than a little hurt at not being asked to assist.

"If maidens like to work like cart hosses, let 'em, I zay, and more vule they to the bargain," with which cryptic remark she snorted again and took an unwilling departure.

That was the one thing she could never forgive in Sareel — her uncommunicativeness. Her thoughts went back to other days, when the maid at the farm used to bring her the daily happenings, almost the daily words, spoken there. Things were very different now, and Emma's garrulous soul resented it. She dubbed Sareel "close," that

epithet dreadful to one of her race. She could understand people being niggardly with their money, but with words—the small change of daily existence that cost nobody anything, and made life so absorbingly interesting and agreeable—that was a failing which was very hard, almost impossible, to forgive to one of Emma's sociable temperament. She told Eli her views as he sat eating his supper of bacon and fried potatoes. He listened attentively without much comment. Men were like that, of course. Emma had little sympathy with her husband's reticence and distressing lack of conversation, but she was used to it by this time.

"Niver wan word du her zay as her can help of, and me bin workin' tu farm off and on these eighteen year and more, and a body tu knaw what thic ole missus 'll git out of 'ee fer a day's work, and not pay 'ee proper fashion nayther when you done it."

"Sareel can't help of that," said the obtuse male; "her's a gude maid sure enough and puts up wi' what few young maidens would from thic old dummon."

"Gude! Who says as her ain't gude? But close, that's what I lay agin her, oncommon close, fer a maid of her age as med be expected to come to me fer advice."

Eli went back to his fried "tetties," and for the rest of the evening made no effort at speech, beyond an occasional grunt of agreement or dissent toward his wife's fluent and unceasing flow of talk. His was not a communicative nature, and

married life had taught him that it was a rash proceeding for a mere man to make statements that provoked both discussion and disagreement from that difficult and far quicker-witted creature, his wife.

## CHAPTER VI

The visitors' bags were fetched from the station by their host, along with the news that their owners were walking across the moor from another direction. It was nearly ten o'clock when Sareel, long waiting, came out to the gate to welcome them.

"It was too hot to walk until evening. Are we disgracefully late? You mustn't trouble to cook. We had a meal before we started. Eggs? Splendid!" And they tumbled upstairs for a wash before their meal, while Sareel went in to boil their eggs.

She was glad that Allan's companion was Mr. Underhill and not that unpleasantly familiar Mr. Paget whom she had so greatly disliked before.

They were downstairs just as their meal was ready. Sareel stood smiling from one to the other, and they both talked at once, so that she could not in the least understand what they said.

"Shut up, kid!" commanded Underhill peremptorily to Allan, and turning to the girl in the shadows he said: "You don't know what trouble he has been giving me on the way, indulging in the wildest and silliest kid's antics. I told him if he went on like that you would think him absolutely a lunatic."

"Nonsense," said Allan; "don't you believe a

single word he says. It is only that he is getting fat and lazy himself and wanted to sit down and rest every half mile or so of the way. Because I didn't he's libelling me like this. I say, what nice brown eggs, and home-made bread, too, and butter! Not cream? You are a wonder to remember everything—and strawberry jam, too. Ye gods!"

Sareel had gone again, but was immediately recalled by a shout.

"You can't have anything to do to-night at this hour, why not stay and be sociable? How's Pete and the dragon?" Underhill lowered his voice and looked cautiously toward the door.

"She's in the kitchen," said Sareel with her eyes dancing, "but she's getting deaf, I fancy."

"Thank heaven for that mercy. And you?" broke in Allan impetuously, "what have you been doing since Easter? You're thinner."

"Don't believe him," interposed Underhill, "he's no judge of proportions; just because I'm wearing an old blazer that has shrunk in the wash he says that I am getting fat."

Sareel was glad that there was no need for her to speak of herself. It was distasteful to her at any time, and to her present questioner it would have been almost unendurable.

She made a pretence of occupying herself to satisfy the suspicious old woman by the kitchen fire, who interrogated her sharply as to what she had been doing and why she stayed so long over clearing away. She made coffee in the fashion they had taught her.



"Have some with us just this first night, to show you're glad to see us again," urged Allan; "*she* needn't know."

Sareel laughed and shook her head decisively as she swept the tablecloth free of crumbs.

"I couldn't, please," she said, looking only at Allan who was opposite, rolling a cigarette with his long-fingered hands; only for an instant her eyes rested on his, a fleeting immeasurable moment, in which she lost all count of time and place and personality. She was caught up to another sphere for a brief moment of time that might have been eternity for the impression of blankness which it left upon her.

"It was a happy thought of yours to finish up our holiday here again. I thought in August one could never get rooms on the moor unless you wrote months before," said Underhill contentedly.

"My luck working again," said Allan, wishing suddenly that his friend would keep silent.

Then he stood up, yawned and stretched himself.

"I don't know how you feel, Jim, but I'm going off to bed."

"Slacker!" said Jim, and then he laughed and got up, too, "and so am I."

But when Allan reached his room (it was the one that he had occupied on his former visit) he did not undress. Instead, he flung open the two windows as wide as they would go, and sat down in the window-seat of one with his arm across the sill. He did not smoke, but sat for an hour look-

ing out at the night, at the shadowy mass of the tor across the valley, listening for the almost inaudible voice of the stream at its foot, which, on his previous visit, had been a smooth ripple that filled the silence of the night with its pleasing cadence.

Ever since his last visit Allan Liddle had been resolutely trying to set his mind away from the farm and its young inmate, whose memory disturbed the current of his thoughts and produced a turmoil such as he had never known before. Although he got on well and easily with girls there was a certain element of shyness and modesty in his nature, a shrinking from emotional experience that is, in spite of accepted tradition, far more common in the youth of one type of man than in women. He had made elaborate plans to fill the months of the "long vac." with engagements, so that there should be no loophole left through which he could escape here. They had failed, no doubt because of their elaboration and conscious preparation. His hint to Jim Underhill had taken root, and had he known of other people's failing arrangements, he might indeed have imagined that the very stars in their course had fought against him to make his coming here possible, in spite of his resolves and fears.

He was afraid of himself, knowing something of the dangers of his own impressionable, facile nature. But the very fact of his fear allured, even as it held him back. He had struggled, and yet he was here. There was no longer any use in

misgivings and feeble anticipations. It was fate, kismet, and there was nothing now but to submit with the thrill of a new and unusual experience pricking through his veins like some heady and unfamiliar wine.

He went off to sleep in the midst of these chaotic reflections, the tumbled dark head pillowed on his arms, the gentle mystery of the summer night lulling his senses to drowsiness and then to insensibility. Outside there came soft flutterings, and the stir of wild things scampering among the heather and brake, whisperings and murmurs faint and low, almost noiseless movements under a sky that was not so much darkness as clouded and gently veiled light. The puny humans who had presumed to set their tiny dwelling in the midst of this vast loneliness seemed of no account at all in this summer night. Even in the daytime the greatness of the moor dwarfed their efforts and handiwork; at night they were swept out of memory, obliterated for the moment as though they had never been and never could be. The moor and its wild life again took complete possession under the stars, masters of their own as they had been and would be through countless æons of unmeasured time.

At last the glimmering light of the eastern sky awoke the sleeper. He was stiff and cold with his involuntary slumber in an uncomfortable position. He flung off his clothes and tumbled into the depths of the great feather bed that had been made for the marriage of its owner's grand-

mother. He was asleep again as soon as his head was among the pillows, and his next conscious remembrance was of a great flood of daylight pouring into the room, and his friend tugging at his shoulder, saying that he had just come from a plunge in the river and what the devil did Allan mean by sleeping all day in this silly fashion. "Get out of it, man," continued the aggressor, and he pulled Allan from the bed, whereupon a sparring match ensued, which soon ended in the dreamer being hopelessly worsted by his more muscular and scientific friend.

## CHAPTER VII

The old house lay basking in the afternoon sun. Across the flagstones of the passage Pete, the sheepdog, had flung himself to sleep from the blazing sun outside. Bees buzzed about the gnarled rose bush, the few blossoms of which hung their heads drowsily, or made their way in at the open window of the parlour to hover over the bowl of heather that Sareel had placed on the table.

It was Sunday afternoon. The usual farm activities were stilled. The farmer and his wife dozed in the front kitchen after their ample meal. Sareel was putting away the tea things in the back kitchen, singing under her breath as she moved lightly from cupboard to shelf. At last her task was done. The old grandfather's clock in the next room struck six haltingly.

She sped up the steep stairs to her room. A blast of hot air smote her at entry. She knelt down and opened the lid of her box. At the bottom, carefully folded, was the green linen frock that the visitor had given her on leaving the summer before. She took it out with trembling fingers, smoothing its folds. Then she slipped out of her shabby morning frock of stiff shirting, whose collar and cuffs were frayed with much wear and washing. She took down her hair. It

shone like spun gold. She brushed it rapidly with her battered brush. It had been washed last night and was fluffy and unruly, with curls and waves that would not lie tidily. She twisted the heavy coils, pinning them securely upon her small head. Then, more than a little tremulous at her own audacity, she took up the green linen frock and slipped it swiftly over her head.

"I think that it will fit you. We must be very nearly the same size," the giver had said. She had been right. It did fit its present wearer, and it was well cut, so that when Sareel saw its simple lines she felt strange and unfamiliar. It had no collar, but was open at the throat, displaying the soft lines of her lissom neck. She tried to pin it over with a brooch, and then took the brooch out again. She was relieved that the sleeves came to her wrists in a modest way. Then she looked down at her feet and frowned: coarse stockings and clumsy shoes went ill with the rest of her attire. They were all she owned, and she had never given them a thought before to-day. She thought that she would take off the new gown and wear the old one that had a patch on each elbow. "Don't," said feminine instinct within her, "you look nicer in this." She took down her hat from the peg. Wear and moorland wind and sun had reduced its original hideousness to a bleached inoffensiveness. It was the hat that the matron had bought for her outfit three years before. It had been then a crude yellow straw trimmed with plaid ribbon of

violet, green and cerise hues. It was innocuous now.

She went downstairs and out of the house on noiseless feet. It was prudence that dictated a quiet leaving, since before now she had been called back from the very threshold to some duty which could very well have waited until her return. She knew that her mistress would have no scruples in recalling her, and so she determined to give her no opportunity this time.

She crossed the moor, a little figure soon swallowed up in the stretch of tawny brown bracken and purple heather which everywhere climbed the slopes, clothing the valleys, spreading itself in splendour across the upland as far as eye could reach, merging mistily with the dim blue horizon beyond the jagged edges of the tors. Pete had followed her, and thrusting his nose against her hand made her start. He was her usual companion on Sunday evenings, but this time she had forgotten him altogether until he made himself apparent. She stooped and rubbed his shaggy head in a wordless apology for her forgetfulness, and he licked her hand and gazed at her with his appealingly liquid brown eyes which said plainly: "Of course it didn't really matter. We know each other too well by this time for me not to understand."

Down they went toward the river, Pete a little ahead of the surefooted companion making her rapid way on his heels. They came here frequently. He knew exactly where she was going,

and soon they reached the deep ravine clothed with heather, little black-stemmed moor ferns clinging in the broken edges of the granite rock, the stream singing just beyond the little sandy reach, with a great boulder worn to polished smoothness in its bed and a second near by that made it as comfortable as an armchair. Pete stopped for a drink and then leaped from boulder to boulder to her. He shook his shaggy coat, sprinkling her with water, then he lay full length on the sun-warmed boulder at her side, his tongue out and his body heaving with content.

It was very quiet here. They had the long curving stretch of river to themselves and the white butterflies that hovered over the heather blossoms and the sheep on the slopes nibbling at the short grass. To their left towered the high brown tor. Sareel liked to lie back and look up at it and the blue sky beyond it. They seemed one, that lonely crest and the tender blueness that crowned its rocky height and seemed to linger like a friend about it. Voices of occasional passers-by floated down from the heights above, but no step crunched the stony path or invaded their solitude. Sareel trailed her fingers in the shallow pool at her side; the water was sun-warmed too. Then she stooped and unfastened her shoes and took off her stockings, plunging her feet into the depths of the stream that gurgled swiftly over her bare insteps and ankles. She put the offending articles behind her, out of sight. Why, she wondered idly in the sleepy con-



tent of her mood, had she never before noticed their ugliness?

She must have dropped off to sleep, for the murmur of the stream mingled drowsily with her thoughts and then was silent. The sun poured down upon her hatless head, where the shadow of the boulder left it exposed. Pete was asleep too, but he was the first to become aware of another presence. He opened one eye suspiciously and then began to wag his tail. He knew that step well enough, but he kept his eyes fixed upon the approaching figure that leaped from boulder to boulder and at last stood a few feet above them, looking at the sleeper in her granite chair, with the sun glinting back from the shimmer of her hair.

He stood for some minutes motionless, gazing. Pete wagged his tail again, and then sprang up and jumped across to him. Allan patted the dog in welcome, adding in a low voice, "Quiet now, Pete, quiet." Pete understood. He thrust his nose into the hand that stroked him and stood motionless.

Then Sareel opened her eyes and saw them. She flushed in her vivid young fashion and sat up, drawing her bare feet under her skirt. Allan Liddle sprang from one boulder to the other, sure-footed as Pete himself, until he reached the little eminence in mid-stream where she waited. And even as he had sat on a boulder lower down he had told himself that he had been waiting for this moment ever since that afternoon months ago,

when he had watched the sunset on her hair and the whiteness of her neck below its narrow collar. Yet he had not known when he left the house half an hour ago that she was not indoors. Underhill had a headache, due to the sun, and had wanted to get back early. Allan had dosed him with aspirin and left him on the couch.

"I came here once before," he said at last, flinging little stones into the stream in front of him, "but the stream was too high to get across then."

"It is only for a week or so it is low enough to come," the girl answered dreamily, not yet quite wide awake, accepting his presence as part of a dream, a happy unsubstantial dream from which she must soon awaken to find him disappear. He was woven into the texture of the dream-world for her inevitably. She had never quite accepted him as actual flesh and blood; he was too dazzling and sunlit a figure for that.

She did not put her thought into words, but the substance of it tinged her eyes as she watched him sending stones skimming through the air from those supple long-fingered hands of his. He was hatless too; he had flung aside his panama into the grass across the stream. He had on grey flannels and his tie was a soft silk knotted one of grey and green.

She could find no words at first. But there was no strangeness nor constraint between them because of their silence. The warm air was full of

fragrances, sun-distilled and penetrating, that hung lingeringly about them.

"You are not smoking," she said at last shyly. He laughed and searched his pockets for a pouch and pipe.

"Confound that Underhill; he pinched my matches and never returned them." He put the pouch back again in his pocket without any apparent regret.

"Where is he to?" asked Sareel, after another interval.

Allan turned on his side and looked at her.

"Lying down with a headache."

Then he laughed again deprecatingly.

"Don't let's waste our time talking of him, though."

His listener flushed again, the dream-world was fast slipping from her and a feeling of insecurity taking its place.

"Tell me of yourself," he began, speaking quickly as though if he hesitated he might lose courage to ask, "I'd love to hear. How long have you been at the farm? Where did you live before you came here? Are your people moor folk?"

"I haven't got none," she said simply. "I was workhouse born, my mother died when I came. . . . She was seventeen, they told me, my age, she wasn't never married . . . I never heard nothing about my father. I stayed there till I come here. I've often wished as I could know something of what my mother was like. I think she wasn't of

these parts, by what they said in the house. There was nothing of hers as was kept, but I oftentimes wonder about her. . . . It wasn't very old to die—seventeen, was it? She was called Sara Hill, that's all as I do know, and I was same and they do call me Sareel 'cause of it."

"I know. I love your quaint little name. But I didn't mean to be prying or inquisitive. Indeed I did not. Poor child! Your mother was only a child too. It only makes the miracle you are all the more miraculous." He had come closer to her. "I felt it when I first saw you, Sareel. I feel it now."

"What?" she asked, lifting her great grey eyes to his.

He saw that the whites were bluish tinged like those of a child. The sweeping dark lashes, tipped with flecks of gold, made them look bigger and more starry still.

"Don't you know," he asked earnestly, "that you are not in the least like other girls of your"—he hesitated at the word class and substituted "way of life? You love beauty, and nature, and you have gentle ways and . . . Oh! it is impossible to put into words, of course. You are worlds removed from the people about you. Don't you know that you are different?"

Ay, she knew. It had been a word, an accusation levelled at her almost ever since she could remember. "Why for baint 'ee more like other maidens?" The old mistress at the farm had flung that taunt at her countless times. But this

time she knew there was no taunt in the thought, only surprise.

"I've always been thought sort o' queer," she said timidly. "I've been laughed at time and again fer likin' the moor and the trees and that."

She hesitated, looking up at his listening attentive face bent toward her. He, at any rate, was not making fun of her. She had been half afraid he might be, in spite of his consideration and interest. She went on again, almost for the first time in her life finding self-expression easy and fluent.

"It was coming to the moor as made me love outdoors. It was so free and big after stone walls and yards and the long straight passages as I was used to aforetime. 'Twas like getting out of schule to a cheel."

The listener, afraid to disturb her by word or gesture, noticed that her use of the dialect was intermittent, that she dropped into it unconsciously, as she lost self-consciousness and the paralyzing sense of a stranger's presence. Her eyes were fixed on the far blue distance, where the long lines of the tors shimmered against the sky.

"'Tis hard to say, brave and hard, all as it hath a-meant to me, like a friend, always there and ready to go to, any time when things be backs-and-for and all contrary like. I reckon as you couldn't understand just how it hath a-been with me times and agen."

She brought her gaze back from that far

purpling distance to his face, and for the first time her eyes rested there without shrinking or timidity. His pulses stirred at that long trusting look, and he had a sense of exaltation under its steady unreluctance.

"No, I am sure that I cannot," he said, trying to subdue the eagerness that leaped urgent and strong to his voice, conscious that a false note, an over-emphatic word or look, might send her back again to her lair like some shy wild thing that ventures out in spite of habit or a native cautiousness. "But I thank you for speaking to me frankly like this. I am more grateful than I can say. I'd like to think that you could come to look upon me as a friend, in something the same way, though of course in an infinitely less degree, as you do the moor."

He broke off, fearful lest he should have said too much. She smiled at what she thought the extravagance of his words and fancy, her slow revealing smile showing the girl she really was, underneath the practical laborious woman that a hard life had made of her externally.

"I never had that said to me afore now," she said at last. "I reckon as the old missus 'ud be brave and vexed, and I'd scarce dare let her guess."

"But why should she? It is nothing to do with her what friends you choose to have, nothing in the world. She need never know anything about our friendship."

Sareel shook her head decisively.

"A body can't dayceive of her, was ever so," she said with an accent of finality in her low protesting voice. "You dawn't knaw her same fashion as meself."

"Then you don't want me as your friend, really? It comes to that, doesn't it, in the end?"

He cursed himself for his outspokenness as he saw the slow tears well up in the grey eyes. She turned her head away from him. He caught in his the little finely-shaped, work-roughened hand.

"Sareel!" he whispered eagerly, "tell me what you really wish and I will agree to it, even if you say that you will never speak to me again. Only you seem so lonely, and friendless, and I thought that perhaps I could make life a little less dreary for you, send you books, write to you."

She pulled away her hand from his, not roughly but with a certain gesture of insistence. He saw her breast heave. Then she faced him again, with head erect and flashing eyes whose curving lashes were tear-wet.

"I never knew a friend," she said, simply stating the fact without self-pity. "I can't put what I do feel into words, but it isn't possible. I'd only get into trouble worse, and she'd most like spake to you and—and Mr. Underhill. I couldn't stand it. You dawn't knaw what the old missus can be like in a proper tear. I thanks 'ee brave and well, more'n I can spake—a mort more. You see I be a sarvant maid and you be a gentleman. They'd think bad of't. I couldn't a-bear thicky talk. 'Twould hurt you too. You dawn't guess the sort

o' talk 'twould be. I've always been agen it for other folks. I'd die rather'n let sich be spoke of you." Her voice had faded away to a mere whisper.

She got up, steadyng herself against the gnarled grey boulder. Allan got up too. She carried her shoes and stockings in her hand.

"Let me." He tried to take them from her.

She shook her head and went swiftly up the grassy slope in front of him. Pete leaping on in front.

"Sareel!" He stopped her by an imperative hand on her shoulder. "Why do you stay here and be unhappy and a slave, for that is what it comes to in fact? Get free of the farm and come away. I'll get my sister to help you. I'd like you to know her. She's big, and true as steel. You'd trust her. You couldn't help it when you looked at her. We are twins, she and I; but she is the man of us, and yet with a woman's sympathies and intuitions."

"I couldn't breathe in a town arter this," she indicated the spacious rolling land, sweep upon sweep of open uncultivated country as far as the eye could reach, lying in all its summer loveliness and colour under the soft glow of the evening sky. Westward glinted the great fiery ball of the setting sun, and all about him clouds trailed their golden masses, liquid gold and amber interlaced with little wispy threads of orange red. The light lingered glowing on the granite crags, and turned their hoary heights to gold too, with the magic



of its evening translucence. The sky was a path of glory, and the moorland track beneath reflected that glory back again with the beauty of common objects raised to immortality for the moment.

Something of that quivering glory rested on Sareel's face, as they stood looking westward together. There was a holiness that made the boy watching her feel that he could kneel down and kiss her bare feet. Then her remark brought him back to earth again with a start.

"It will be near supper getting most like. I must be turning back." She had put aside all but the common duty calling her back to the farm.

She went behind a boulder and put on her shoes and stockings. They walked back together until the low-pitched roof of the farm showed among the trees of the land behind it. They had not spoken for the last half mile.

"Thee'd best not come wi' me further," she said, stopping suddenly so that Pete came racing back in enquiry as to her halt.

"Look here. Whatever happens, remember that I am always your friend at all times. Promise me you will not forget."

"Ay, I'll mind that brave and well," and she was gone fleet-footed over the moor with the sheep dog at her side.

Allan Liddle stood watching her, wondering what there was of quiet strength about this girl that silenced his protests before they were uttered, marvelling again at the delicacy, the un-

erring sense of fitness for which this untutored, friendless little being had so sure an instinct. With no finer upbringing than a country institution could afford, neither friends nor traditions, no gentle nurture or instruction, she was in essentials as true a lady as his sister herself. Was it ancestry, or accountable by some freak of nature, impossible to explain?

He had offered her friendship, but in his secret heart Allan Liddle was aware that something deeper and more intimate yet stirred within him. He was young and impressionable, but he was no sensualist. He flung himself face down on the heather and did battle with the seething flood of thoughts that swirled and eddied in his brain. Fate, destiny—call it what he would—had flung to him this strange and rich experience. Romance, that secret of all healthy youth, flowered at its unveiling with a rich and intoxicating perfume that went to his head like wine. He tore at the plant before him with nervous unsteady fingers. Sareel was right. It was better that they should let this experience remain perfect, untouched by the coarse finger of reality and sordid comment, unspoiled and unavowed. She had shown him the right path, and he would walk in it without deviating. But it needed only a touch, a look, a word, for youth to break down all the barriers that prudence and experience had reared, and ride triumphant to its aim. The long-fingered hands ceased to tear at the plant before them as Allan buried his head in them and remained motionless,

the blood throbbing audibly in his ears, the pulse at his temples beating unsteadily.

How long he stayed like this he knew not; but when he opened his eyes he saw that the sun had sunk beyond the furthest tor, and all the sky was a-shimmer with the soft reflection of the sunset glow.

He got up, picked the bits of heather and bracken out of his clothes, and walked back to the farm. The lamp was lit and shed its little circle of light over the white tablecloth at which Underhill sat alone. He saw, as he went through the little garden, Sareel's figure moving among the shadows of the kitchen, and he heard the murmur of a raucous voice that went on complainingly.

"Heavens! man, I thought you were lost," greeted his friend irritably as he opened the door and went in. "What a tramp you must have had of it these hours! I wished afterwards that I had come along with you instead of grousing indoors like this."

"How's the head?"

"All right again, thanks. Anyhow, we'll start early to-morrow morning and make up for today. What time shall we order breakfast? Apparently Sareel is up at any hour."

"Whenever you like. I'm game for as early as you wish. We might go Hernworthy way and back by the Druids' Circle. Old man Ashplant calls it seventeen miles, but my map makes it at least twenty-three."

"Good. Glad to see your energy is coming back again, my son. You must admit you've been a bit slack this last term."

"Rot!" ejaculated Liddle, making a pretence of eating a meal.

When it was over and Sareel came to clear away, he lit his pipe and sat back against the window, watching her. Underhill talked incessantly about the early breakfast and their morrow's tramp and the meal they would have of chicken and bacon, whortle-berry pie and cream on their return.

"It's a sheer dream, your wortleberry pie. I could manage a whole one by myself."

Allan, back in the shadows, wondered why it had never struck him before what hopeless drivel his friend sometimes talked. He wondered that Sareel had the patience to answer him, as she did in her brief phrases and monosyllables. She had slipped off the grey green linen frock, fearful of comment, and had donned the ugly brown with the patched elbows. Allan noticed the tired circles under her eyes, that made them look even bigger and more plaintive than usual.

"I say, Underhill, haven't you settled everything?" he broke in across his friend's monologue.

Sareel slipped away then without a look at the figure among the shadows. She was very tired to-night. Sunday was a hard day of cooking, and since the mistress of the house took a rest on the Sabbath from her own labours, she had all the more time for faultfinding and complaints.

## CHAPTER VIII.

The days went swiftly by. The young men were out all and every day, now. Sareel only saw them at breakfast and the evening meal. They were going the next week. The old woman grumbled; they were profitable lodgers, careless of expense and uncritical of the weekly bills; she was sorry to lose them and their liberal payments.

"Reckon as you'll be brave and glad tu zee their backs anyways," said Emma.

She had come to do a day's baking, since the men had lunch in the harvest fields and it meant extra batches of bread, which Sareel had no time to prepare. What with luncheon-baskets to pack every morning, and evening meals to prepare every afternoon her time was fully occupied. She made no reply to Emma's conjectures beyond "If it bain't one work 'tis another."

Sareel was living in the present. She never looked forward now to the future nor back upon the past. The day was enough for her, with its burden and work and the few minutes in which she was spoken to and treated as a human being, as an individual, and not merely as a machine which prepared a certain number of meals, made a certain number of pounds of butter, baked batches of bread, cakes, pies, turnovers day after day.

She often wondered if anyone had chanced to see her walking on the moor with Allan Liddle that Sunday evening; for ever since then she had become aware of more constant fault-finding, harder tasks, and the impossibility of doing or saying the right thing. There were muttered epithets addressed to her that she often failed to catch, coarse uncomplimentary remarks that even yet had not lost their power to make her flush or wince. She was continually being compared to her disfavour with "respectable maidens" and "they as an't been dragged up nor work'us born and reared."

If old arms could have carried heavy trays she knew that she would never have been permitted to wait upon the best parlour. Even the farmer made an occasional feeble protest, saying: "Be a bit too much down on the maid, I reckons" or "If thee let'st her go thee'll niver git a better, if as gude." He had learnt long since the futility of such remarks, but Sareel was none the less grateful to him for them and would thank him by a glance when his wife was not looking. Once the old woman intercepted it and burst out: "Thee cannot let the men alone then, not even the respectable wans under their own roof. What can a body expect from wan o' yer rearin', and bastard born to the bargain too, worse luck?" The man had tried to hush her with a warning, but Sareel, with sudden daring and a lift of the head, had said: "I will not be spoken to like dirt. Mind that! I'll not be trated these ways no

longer. If I'm gude enough to live under this roof I'm gude enough to be trated daycint or I'll go."

It was the first time she had attempted to defend herself, and the old woman recognised that she had reached the limit of her endurance. Like all bullies she flinched from anyone who had strength enough to defy her. She had never believed that Sareel would dare.

Emma, listening with all her ears in the security of the back kitchen, applauded Sareel for standing up to her mistress. When five minutes later Sareel came out to her she said: "Well done, me maid, well done yu. Let her have of it, and purty often too. That'll larn her to kape a civiler tongue in her head, 'ees vay."

Sareel made no reply. She was shaking from head to feet after the encounter with her adversary. She had defied her, but was the effort worth the cost? she asked herself as she went about her work with unseeing eyes and hands deft from long habit. What had given her this sudden valour? In the silence of the night she again asked herself the unanswerable question. Had it been worth while? She doubted it. Life had grown strangely difficult of late, beyond her power to understand or alter. Why should a taunting accusation or an angry speech hurt any more sharply now than it had done previously? Once she had treated such words like a shower of rain or a fall of snow. They came and passed,

and the moor and the sky were unchanged by their passage.

She did not realise that once she had looked out upon life and the world about her with her own eyes, but now she was seeing it through those of another human being as well. It was puzzling to a simple unanalytical mind such as hers. It complicated an existence that, hard enough before, had always been inevitable. Once she had been afraid of the unknown, of strangers, new ideas, fresh faces and unfamiliar experiences; now she was growing afraid of herself, and it was a deeper, subtler fear, that of this new insurgent self that had flashed out in angry defiance of her mistress in an unexpected, inexplicable mood of resentment and independence.

It seemed the next day that Emma had been right: that outspoken protest had done her a service; for the old eyes, watching her curiously from under shaggy brows, seemed to gaze with less malevolence, and the raucous voice had a lessened bitterness. Many times the farmer had warned his wife that if she pressed Sareel too far the girl would rebel and give notice, and the woman had always laughed him roughly to scorn, with the retort: "Not her, an't got the pluck of a mouse, thicky maid an't." She had seen her mistake at last. Sareel had shown her, and for a time at least she was taking warning by the new knowledge, learning the imprudence of limitless abuse.

Emma was triumphant.



"Told 'ee zo, now didn't I? Yu've a put up wi' her too long as 'tis, more vule yu!"

The days flashed by quickly now, until there were only two whole ones remaining before the present visitors left the farm. Sareel counted every hour jealousy, as a miser counts his gold. She had no further intimate talk with Allan. On the few occasions, when Underhill had been absent and they had been alone together, neither had spoken of other than ordinary topics, the events of the day, happenings on the farm, the rabbit that Pete had caught on the moor and brought home in his mouth the day before. "Mostly they be too clever for that," she had said; "and Pete he do know, that's why he was so proud of himself." The dog heard his name and came in, pushing open the door with a paw, and looking from one to the other with his great appealing eyes. Underhill was just behind. Talk became general, and Pete, who liked nothing better, was allowed to stay in the parlour until his master called him for bed at nine o'clock.

Sareel, awaking with the dawn, thought with a pang that the last complete day had come, the beginning of the end. The end of what she could not explain to herself, only the thought lay like a heavy weight on her heart, as she took her shoes in her hand to go noiselessly downstairs. She flung open doors and windows to the sweet morning air, and, going to the back kitchen door, looked out at the fair morning world lying so still and calm under the cloudless blue sky, with the

sun gilding the hill tops, and the dewy freshness of an untrodden world lying like a blessing over moor and stream and rocky gold-tipped height.

She lit the kitchen fire and went to see to the parlour. These morning hours that she had to herself were always among the pleasantest of her day. She swept the floor and set the room straight, folding up the newspapers tossed about the sofa, setting tidily together the books that were scattered all over table and chairs. Then she dusted carefully the old-fashioned furniture and the mantelpiece littered now with pipes, packets of tobacco, boxes of matches and cigarettes.

She stooped to take up the pair of brown boots by Underhill's chair. Never on this visit had there been more than that one pair left for her to clean. She had heard the latter ask his friend the reason, and she had caught his muttered "Like to do them myself, thanks." She had not guessed until later that it was because he could not bear her to do this for him. She had smiled at the thought and its absurdity, since almost every hour of the day brought her harder and more disagreeable duties than that. But this morning as she bent down to take one pair she saw a second.

When she had finished cleaning Underhill's in the back kitchen she put her hand into Allan Little's. There was something pushed tightly into the toe. She pulled it out unthinkingly. It was a folded piece of paper, and as she smoothed it out she read:

"I must see you again before we go. Is it possible to-night? You needn't answer. I shall be by the mushroom rock in case you can come. There's a moon. Remember that I will not have you clean these boots.—A. L."

She heard a faltering step coming downstairs, and she stuffed the scrap of paper into her apron pocket. It was the second letter that she had ever received. The first had been a few months after she came to the farm—from the matron who had died since. Sareel still treasured that first letter, which she carefully kept in the workbox that the writer had given her, one of her few personal belongings. She bent over cleaning the boots, despite their owner's avowed protest. Her heart sang for very joy, and so loudly that she did not hear the speech of the woman standing looking at her. She looked up at last, her joy shining like two lamps in her eyes. She could not stifle their light.

"Dawdlin', bain't 'ee over they there boots on-common long? Maister'll be in fer breakfast avore 'tis ready."

"No, I'll get it next thing. Kettle's singing a'ready;" and Sareel put the boots down and hurried over the preparation of the morning meal.

Nothing was impossible to her this morning. She felt that she could have compassed the impossible instead of the mere meal of bacon, fried suet pudding and potatoes, which she cooked and set upon the table as she heard the farmer coming

through the yard. She had her own meal later, when the other two had done theirs. It was usually cold and unappetising by that time. But what did that matter, what did anything, this morning?

She laid the breakfast table for the two in the parlour and watched them racing one another across the moor, towels in hand, for their morning bathe in the stream. She took up two cans of hot water and the boots. There was a pile of letters to be taken from the postman. She often wondered what people found to write about to one another so often. Then she slipped her hand into the pocket of her apron that her fingers might feel her own letter there in safe certainty.

The last day was to be spent in a final tramp. She had heard them discussing details the night before.

"I wish you could come with us," Underhill said at breakfast, as she brought in their coffee and cream; "seems a beastly shame that you should have to stew in a hot kitchen in grilling weather like this, when you ought to be out enjoying yourself."

Allan did not look up from the letter he was reading, but a little vein in his forehead stood out throbbing for an instant.

Sareel put down the coffee-pot and jug with the sugar bowl beside them. She laughed, a little breathlessly.

"I reckon as I'm used to't right enough."

She put over a chair and looked across the room to the man absorbed in his letters.

"'Tis all ready," she said softly.

Allan looked up then, nodded, and went back to his letter again. She went out to her own delayed meal.

"A girl like that has a rotten sort of existence. She's worthy of a better fate than this," said Underhill, helping his friend liberally to eggs and bacon from the dish in front of him.

"Um," said Allan inattentively as he poured out the coffee. He had always the greatest reluctance to any discussion of Sareel with his friend.

"It's our beastly social system that's all wrong, upside down and infernally crooked all through," said the other, helping himself as generously; "why should you and I sit down and enjoy a good breakfast at our ease while she has to get up and cook it for us? It infuriates me."

The infuriated one had socialistic leanings, but in spite of his fury he made an exceedingly good breakfast.

Allan did not take up the cudgels, as often happened, in the cause of the despised social system. They were the best of friends, and invariably argued on opposite sides for the sake of the argument, assuming different standpoints as the mood took them. It was usually Allan who was the fiery socialist despising convention and what he called "toshery," while Underhill was the doughty champion of things as they are. But positions were easily reversed without either holder being prejudiced against reversing them at any given moment.

"Anyhow she cooks a jolly sight better than you ever would if you were rash enough to suggest getting your own breakfast. Do you remember the summer we camped out, and the stuff you called porridge?"

"Yes, and your ribald remarks on it and your own failure when you tried to go one better. She does cook jolly well, but looking at her, irrespective of speech, clothes, and position, would you say that little Sareel was put into the world merely to cook and clean? Why! she's got the manner and ways of a lady with her. She wouldn't disgrace Lois, for example, if she asked her on a visit and she were decently dressed."

"Had a letter from her this morning," interposed Allan, abruptly; "she's wondering when we are going to get tired of the moor."

"Why doesn't she ever come here?" The bait had lured him, as the baiter had expected it would.

"Says she can't afford it as long as we keep up the Priory. Rot, of course, but you can't argue with Lois when her mind is made up."

"She worked jolly hard last term. Women do usually grind at college, that's why they don't get like their brothers the full benefit of what the papers call 'a university career.' What's she going to do? A career?"

He eyed Lois' brother a trifle anxiously, but the latter was busy lighting his pipe and did not notice it, replying, when his pipe began to draw:

"Heaven knows, I am sure that I don't. One can't ever question Lois."

Underhill would as soon have thought of questioning an archangel for his part. He was always a little vexed with Allan for treating his sister with the traditional casualness of brothers. He was putting on his boots and noticed Allan's.

"Thought you had a fad for cleaning your own nowadays?" he said, as he tossed them one by one across to their owner.

Allan, bending down, slipped his hand into the toe of each in turn and did not answer. He flushed under his tan as he laced them up.

The idea of the note to Sareel had come to him suddenly last night. It seemed the only chance of reaching her, and he had acted on impulse. Even now it was not too late to withdraw. He might alter his mind and fail to meet her, or come down and intercept her going. Then his impressionable mind swung back again to the realisation that she might not consent. He might wait in vain.

All day his thoughts oscillated between the two poles uncertainly. At one moment he resolved to throw up his imprudent plan, it would be the wiser course; then prudence would be thrown to the winds, and he decided that he would at all cost risk her coming. He could not go away and leave her without a word of farewell or explanation. That would be caddish, impolite. He had thanked her inwardly afterwards for her refusal of his offer of friendship that Sunday evening on the

moor. He had seen its good sense and practicability. But, after all, life, especially when one is only twenty-one, is not all good sense and reason. It wasn't human nature to act as though it were. Even Lois, who ragged him on his impetuosity and his habit of doing wild things on the impulse of the moment, would agree to that. For all her assumption of maternal airs and admonitions she was the same age as himself, and ought to understand something of what youth and its turbulent passion meant.

They had eaten their lunch, and were resting under the shadow of a boulder for a smoke. Allan looked across at Underhill, huddled against a rock with his hat tilted over his eyes. He wondered if Lois would ever really care for him. Poor old Jim! He had got it badly, but Lois would never play with a fellow. She would be straight with him whatever happened. It was not her way to shuffle.

He thought of what Jim had said that morning at breakfast about Sareel not disgracing Lois in essentials. Of course she would not. He wished that he knew how to bring them together. He looked up, out of half-closed eyes at the great bare stretch of tor above him, with its steep brown sides dotted with granite rocks as grey as polished steel in the sun. Lois said that he never followed ideas out to their logical conclusion, that he trifled with their significance. She was tougher mentally than he. He had always known that from childhood. She would walk up to things



and face them, when he wanted to pretend they were not there. There was no pretence about Lois, good or bad. She had got into fearful hot water in school-room days because of that damning fact. He remembered idly an old governess of theirs, with a wart on her nose and a very precise way of speaking. "You will never do well in the world, because you look at it too closely, Lois. You ignore nothing, and to live successfully one must ignore a great many disagreeable facts." He could hear his sister now, saying in her clear definite voice: "I don't wish to ignore disagreeable facts, Miss Vigers; I want to try and understand them. Women do now. They have ignored them too long."

The precise voice and the ringing tones of Lois echoed drowsily in his sleepy brain. His pipe slanted, then finally slipped from his mouth. Insects droned in the grass beside him. He fell asleep to dream of Sareel and Lois quarrelling desperately, while Jim Underhill and he watched them ineffectually from a safe distance. It was a tiresome unhappy dream.

Somebody turned him over with a prodding foot.

"You old sinner! Going to sleep here all day? We've been here an hour and a half already. You've been babbling in your sleep—something about Lois I heard."

It was seven o'clock when they got back, dusty and a trifle footsore and "as hungry as hunters," Jim Underhill avowed.

"I hope you've got us a good dinner, our last. It makes me want to weep, Sareel. Not duck and green peas *and* new potatoes! Why, my mouth waters at the mere thought! I'd like a bath. Plenty of hot water! Good! I'll come down and fetch it in a sec'. Don't be silly. A girl like you can't carry heavy cans, and if you could I wouldn't let you."

And he ran upstairs singing in a voice that was nowhere near the tune:

"My love she's but a lassie yet."

"Shut up," said Allan, later, when his friend enlarged upon their approaching departure; "you do run a subject to death sometimes."

"First catch your hare," mocked Underhill; "anyhow you've not made a single remark for the last twenty minutes, my son. What makes you so damned melancholy? I dissipate mine in talk, the easier method, believe me."

"Chuck it," responded the other, shortly.

The see-saw was still at work within him. He kept his eyes away from the figure that moved from table to cupboard and back again, while Underhill chaffed and talked in his bantering fashion, to which Allan made only brief and occasional replies.

"If you are looking forward to getting rid of us, you might at least have the decency to cover it up a little, out of consideration for my wounded feelings."

Sareel smiled faintly, and was gone. From his place opposite the window Allan could see the great silver disc of the moon rising over the tor and flooding the world with shimmering light.

"A sin to stay in such a night, but I'm too dead beat to go out again. I suppose we ought to pack our traps if we are to go by the early train. It's the only decent one in the day."

Underhill stretched his long arms and yawned, half asleep already.

"I thought we decided that yesterday."

"I daresay we did. Moor air and sun have reduced my brain to pulp. Going to bed now?"

"Not yet."

"Good-night then. I am. Too tired to see."

"Good-night."

He sat listening to Underhill's slouching tread on the stairs, the slamming of his bedroom door, his step across the room overheard, then the door opened noisily again and boots flung heavily into the passage, the door slammed and then silence. Somebody was moving across the kitchen, and the murmur of voices rose and fell. There was a clatter of plates and dishes, and the sound of a chair scraping against the flagstones of the front kitchen. Then a slow deliberate step climbed the stairs. Somebody tapped the old mahogany weather glass, shaped like a violin, and a second slow step approached and then mounted the stairs. Still somebody was moving in the kitchen. The shaft of light from a window fell across the bushes outside.

Allan got up and went out. His steps were inaudible as he moved across the little strip of grass and leaped over the low fence that divided it from the moor. He flung away his half-smoked cigarette. The moonlight was so bright that every bush and boulder stood out distinct and clear. The stream was a silver running thread. In the pale sky the constellations came out one by one, overpowered by the greater light that flooded the great wide stretch with fairy beauty, mystery, and a sense of unreality impossible to escape.

Uncertainty fell away like a discarded cloak as Allan Liddle went swiftly toward the trysting place. All scruples and misgivings were wiped away from his sensitive young soul, swallowed up or transmuted by the radiant beauty of the summer night. His spirits rose with every step. All memory of the everyday world disappeared. He might have been a shepherd youth upon Mount Latmus. Yet it was no goddess that he awaited, but a human being who had lured him by her primal simplicity and unconscious spell.

Would she come? He asked himself continually that question as he reached the shadow of the mushroom rock. The brilliant moonlight cast a fantastic pattern of stems and plant ferns on its surface, gleaming white in its beams. He could see the long stretch of the little winding path worn by a succession of feet among the moor grass and clumps of heather and bracken. His restless fingers rolled a cigarette as he waited.

There was a sudden stir behind him, and he turned quickly, expecting to find Sareel standing there, but it was only a group of moor ponies who scampered away with waving manes and frisking tails, their unshod feet making a soft pattering thud on the turf as they raced past him into the valley.

She would not come then. He had half thought as much. He pulled out his watch. He could see the figures on the dial quite plainly. It was a quarter to eleven. He put it back and lit his cigarette, telling himself that he was not really disappointed, that in his heart of hearts he had scarcely dared to hope that she would appear, that he did not in the least regret his coming out to make sure—this perfect night was of itself sufficient reward for a far greater effort than he had made. He would smoke his cigarette and then turn back again, since all possibility was extinguished by this time.

His moody eyes were turned away from the twisting moorland path, so that they did not see the hurrying little figure walking across it with rapid steps.

He started as she put a timid hand on his sleeve, and his face lighted up instantly.

"Oh!" She was a little breathless with her haste and the excitement of adventure. His fingers closed over her shrinking little hand. She let it rest there. He could feel her trembling. He drew her close under the shadow of the rock.

"I was so afraid that you would not come," he

said, in accents of relief. "I was just going back to the house."

"I had to do things first—for the morning. I ran part way in case——" She had not breath enough to go on.

He laughed his gay ringing laugh of confidence and certainty. Its echoes floated back to them eerily from the valley below. The night was vocal with it: reiterating, repeating it and flinging it back as though in mockery.

"I say, let's climb the tor. There's light enough to see the way. It's easier going the other side. You aren't afraid?"

She laughed then, but low under her breath:

"I could climb it blindfold any time."

He still had hold of her hand. They went round to the other side where the river flashed upon them, murmuring to itself over its stony shallows. Some wild thing moved among the undergrowth, a rabbit or stoat perhaps.

"I'd best go ahead. I'm more used to't like."

He released her hand then, and followed her sure-footed lithe young body up the tiny track, in and out among the heaped grey stones and gorse bushes. There was no sound but the song of the waters below, and occasionally a little fall of loosened stones or a handful of earth pattered down from under their feet, falling to the valley with soft thud and echo.

At last they gained the height, a sort of shallow ravine where the rocks made a seat with the step beneath.

"You can't get forrader," she said, holding out her hand to help him climb up beside her.

For a few seconds neither spoke, as they sat gazing out over the wonder below their eyes, tor upon shadowy tor away toward the sky-line, with the moonlight streaming down on ravine and gully, on rock and steep precipitous slopes, to the deep valley below, where the quiet earth seemed to sleep cradled securely and watched over by those brooding heights that looked down upon her from above. It might have been a world empty of humanity. For they themselves seemed scarcely real at this moment, seemed to be incorporeal dream-presences, as impalpable as the shimmering silver light that lay so lightly over all.

If Allan Liddle had felt any fear of himself, and sense of danger to the girl at his side in this moonlight escapade, it disappeared at that moment, burnt away to purity by the wonder and the holiness of the night about them. His eyes sought her face. It looked wan and tired in the sharp light, with the dark lashes a shadow on the whiteness of her cheek. Then she raised her eyes to his and he saw the reflection of his own mood shining in their grey pools, black pools now of awe and mystery.

After a long interval they began to talk fitfully, tentatively, with long pauses of silence in between the lingering sentences.

"I wondered after I had written whether I ought to have asked you to do this. . . . I wasn't sure . . . or if you'd understand. I might have

been certain of that, though . . . you wonderful little being! The moonlight suits you, Sareel. . . . It is your true element, I believe. The light of day is too crude and harsh. . . . You make me think of cobwebs with the dew clinging to them; and by this elfin light you are in your right setting at last."

She leaned her head against the rock behind her, and smiled at his extravagance. She was not listening very intently to what he said, only to the music of his voice that lulled her drowsily, like the faint babble of the stream so far below. For her, too, the world had sunk away, the squalid drab world of cleaning and cooking. She was Cinderella come to the ball with her shabby raiment changed to silver tissue and glistening satin, and the fairy prince at her side. She would wake up soon, too soon indeed, but while it lasted she would give herself up to the beauty and enchantment of it, abandon herself whole-heartedly without stint, careless of to-morrow and the consequences.

"I'll think things out and write to you," Allan said at length, in a musing tone. "I can't think clearly in your presence; you are too bewildering for sober thought. We'll find a way out, hang on to that idea for all you are worth. I must—I'll get my sister to help me—and you. You'll have a little patience with me, eh?"

She was leaning forward now, her elbows on her knees, her chin in her cupped hands.

"Ay. I will that, fer sure. It'll be sort o' lone-some wi' you gone. Differn-wise to what it was



avorettime. I shan't be able to write 'ee proper fashion. Mebbe I'll learn in time. Thee mustn't laugh fust along."

He turned upon her hotly at that remark.

"Laugh at you! Sareel, you know that I should never do that, not even if . . . I didn't care . . . you must be positive of that."

She had flung aside to-night without explanation her refusal of his friendship. She had forgotten all about it, as he, too, had forgotten for the moment.

"Why, you're shivering, child. Cold, eh?"

She shook her head. He slipped his arms out of his coat and wrapped it about her shoulders. It was warm from his body. She resisted him.

"No. I will not . . . you will only be cold yer ownself, no vay!"

It was dangerous to struggle on the narrow plateau where they were perched. He reminded her of that. At last to appease her he sat closer, and held the coat about his own shoulders by the sleeve. He slipped his arm about her. Her head fell against his shoulder, as confidently as that of a child.

"You are such a little slip of a thing," he said tenderly; "as I say, only gossamer and dew."

"Ah, but I be strong more'n you'd guess. I was never ill in all my days, never wance."

He turned so that he could touch her hair with his lips. He wondered what there was about this girl that protected her. What was the secret of her power—spiritual and innate, or born of mere physical purity and innocence?

She began to talk of herself with a little encouragement, of other nights when she had wandered on the moor until daybreak. "Folks 'ud think me proper mazed. I never an't told nobody avore. You'm differn-wise. You understand." Then she told him of a sultry breathless night, hotter and more airless than this, when she had bathed in the pool down yonder in the moonlight. He could see her as she spoke, her white body dripping silver, its slim curves revealed in all their graceful lines, free from the hampering of clumsy, toil-stained garments. He sought for her hand again, the little rough work-coarsened hand.

"You'll not spake of this . . . our coming out . . . to yer friend, to Mr. Underhill . . . ever? I wouldn't like it spoke on."

"I shall never mention it to anyone, not even to my sister, although she is probably one of the few people who would understand. It is our memory, our beautiful secret, yours and mine."

She pushed back a tress of hair that had fallen over her eyes.

"'Twill be brave and strange, the place wi'out 'ee," she said, going back to that new pain gnawing at her heart beneath the peace of this hour together.

"And yet what have I done? So little for you. This is only our second real meeting and talk. Why have we not seen more of each other, made the most of our opportunities that are all gone now? Sareel, you will trust me?"

"Ay, I'll that fer sure. You needn't to axe."

"Everything is confused with me now, except you and the wonder of you. That is the only clear fact in my brain at present. All the rest is blurred and indistinct, confusing my thoughts. I don't want you to imagine that I say this and do not really mean it with my very soul, with every bit of me. You see, I am not through college yet. I haven't made up my mind what I am really going to do with my life. I know it is time I did, but I have always dabbled in so many things until I scarcely know my own bent. Now Jim Underhill from a kid made up his mind and stuck to it all the way through. He's going to be a school-master some day. My mind wanders too much. But perhaps the thought of you will steady me now. . . . The dreams of what the future may bring us."

"You frighten me when you do spake like that," she broke in with a note of fierceness and protest in her quiet low-toned voice.

"Why?" He tried to stroke her hair with the hand that held the coat sleeve about himself. "I don't mean to. I'd hate the thought that I did. What frightens you—my talk of the future?"

"Ay, that's it. I be a-feared."

"Of what? Tell me. I want to know. Of me?"

She shook her head slowly.

"Not you, I've never been a-feared of you, but the way you do spake as if——" she faltered, "is if——"

"Yes? Go on. Tell me how the way I speak

frightens you. Sareel! little one, don't be frightened, or I shall reproach myself bitterly."

"Thee mustn't reproach thyself. 'Tis only my fulishness, most-like; but when you do spake of time to come, as if 'twas all sartain and sure, then I do get a-feared, mortal feared"—her voice sank so low that he had to bend down to catch the faintly uttered words—"as 'twill never be, as 'tis a-tempting Providence, mebbe."

"Dear, primitive child! Yours is the old fear that the gods will be jealous of the rash mortals who dare count on the future and will avenge themselves upon us."

" 'Tis all very well to make a mock of me," she said, a little resentfully; "but I can't a-help of 't. I can't."

"Of course you can't. I am not making fun of you. We all feel like that sometimes. Isn't life enough to make us, the tangle and perplexity and failure of it all? There! I am not going to poison your uncorrupt mind with our feeble modern pessimism."

Sareel did not know in the least what pessimism might be. She said so timidly.

"Well, let us say it means looking on the black side of things, imagining that we are going to be miserable, unsuccessful, silly. I am always denouncing it, but being the child of my age, I am just as feeble myself. I will not infect you. Say that you will not forget me, that you will believe in me whatever happens."

She said it, laughing at the futility of any need of words or vows between them.

"I'll never fergit. I'll mind 'ee always, and trust 'ee, brave and long."

He stooped and kissed her then. Their warm lips clung together passionately, yearningly, while the ancient hills looked down in majesty.

She pushed him from her at last with her hands against his breast. He caught them in his, laughingly.

"Strong, do you call yourself? Then get them out of my grasp, if you can, Samson!"

She tried ineffectually, laughing too. But his wrists were steel against her efforts. Then she bent and laid her lips against those supple, slim-fingered hands, so surprisingly strong and tenacious. She heard him utter a little choking sound, half protest, half sob, and he released her wrists immediately.

"A man can never refuse a woman who asks him that way," he said in an odd muffled voice. "Isn't it time we thought about going in?"

In spite of her secret strength he had a moment of panic then that he might be weak and fool enough to attempt to spoil this perfect hour, destroy her faith and trust in him, and lay in ruins that vague alluring future that he meant to build for them both.

They went down in single file, going cautiously, for the descent needed more care than the ascent. The stones rattled down one after another.

"Careful! Shall I go first?" he called to her.

She did not stop, but leaped like a sure-footed young goat from tuft to boulder, and dropped over the last edge of granite sheer on to the grass below, some ten or twelve feet down.

"Thee'd best go round," she called, making a cup of her hands about her lips for the sound to carry.

He laughed her advice to scorn and dropped after her. The moon had travelled far since its rising behind the tor three hours since. They walked on in silence, until they came to the hill from whence the house, with its white walls gleaming brightly under the thatch, shone from afar.

"Let me go on alone," she urged, stopping and facing him. "Thee'd best."

His arms were about her closely for an instant, his lips again on hers, as they said a wordless farewell.

She went round to the back. Her hand closed noiselessly over the heavy old latch. It did not give to her hand. A cold chill struck to her heart, then; for never in all the time that she had dwelt here had she known the door bolted and barred against anyone. So her absence had been discovered, somebody knew. She went round to the front on silent feet. That door was closed and locked too. But whoever had fastened it had overlooked the kitchen casement, that could not be properly shut from the inside. She inserted her fingers cautiously and pulled it wide, climbed to the sill and dropped to the high window seat on the other side.

She had an impression of strangeness and unreality in finding the familiar place just as she had left it a few hours before, the farmer's boots by the chair, the newspaper flung to the floor, and the tabby cat sleeping curled up in a ball on the rag rug of grey and red pieces. She crept upstairs and into bed, but not to sleep, remembering that she had left the casement open but that it would serve for entry to another. She heard his light step along the path, and then his cautious tread and the almost silent shutting of his door.

For long she lay quite still. The sloping roof beams made a pattern on the white-washed wall opposite. The moonlight flowed in pools over the bare uneven boards from the uncurtained window. Everything was unreal to-night, herself, Allan Liddle, their vigil on the tor, the old familiar places. She had no fear of what discovery might mean to her. She had lived past that, reached the other side where nothing external could touch or wound her any longer. How odd to think that she had once been hurt by scathing bitter words and taunts! There was only one human being who could ever hurt her now, and he was all tenderness and understanding, past all words for gentleness, and he loved her; and there her world touched the stars. He was going to make plans to bring her into his life. She doubted then for an instant Allan's power to bring it about. But he had given her his word, and she had promised to have faith. Doubt shrivelled up and was borne away from her like a leaf on the wind.

## CHAPTER IX

The old woman was watching Sareel as, on her knees, the girl scrubbed the stone-paved passage and the granite doorstep. Sareel looked up once and met that fixed relentless gaze. A shudder ran through her. There was something evil in that look, and although she was no longer personally afraid, its savage inhumanity and bitterness made her tremble. Allan had been gone a week. She had not expected that he would write so soon, yet each day the question came to her lips: "Will it be to-day?" and each day there was no letter for her. She spread them out before her, the two little scraps of paper from him, the first that had appointed their trysting-place, the second that he had pressed into her hand as he went away, when she had helped to carry out their luggage. "Put that bag down," he had commanded, before the very eyes of the household, and as he took it from her she had felt him thrust something between her fingers.

"Good-bye, but only for a time. Your A.," she had read.

It was not an effusive love-letter, but it satisfied her hungry heart, and she took it out a hundred times a day, just to assure herself and to look at the small, beautiful handwriting with which she was now familiar. Soon she would



know that writing better still; it could not be much longer before she heard.

She was busy making whortleberry jam. Emma's brood picked the small berries and brought the full baskets, their chubby faces smeared with the juice, their lips and hands stained purple. "Urts," as they were called in the vernacular, took a long time to gather in any quantity, and the mistress at the farm paid the lowest possible price for them, so that Emma grew indignant and threatened to cut short the supplies.

"If 'tworn't for my time, as I scarce can spare, I'd take 'em to market, so I would. Skin a stone, so her would, and suck 'ees blood arterward. Gits wuss'n her did used to be, a dale wuss. No wonder as her darters dawn't niver come back home, not wan."

Sareel had scarcely heard of their existence. Mrs. Ashplant never mentioned her family, nor permitted reference to them.

"Gude rason for why. Her never couldn't abide 'em, nor they her, proper old toad to 'em," explained Emma "What bin doing tu yersel?" she continued, casting a curious glance at Sareel, stirring the great pan of bubbling jam over the stove.

They were alone together. Emma, knowing that the mistress had gone to market with poultry, had taken the opportunity to come over for a gossip.

"Looks as if 'ee'd pulled a turmit and drunk 'ees blood," she commented candidly.

Sareel flushed then. There was a change in her, and the keen eyes of Emma had detected it. It was the change wrought in all but the very toughest humans by anxiety, by waiting day after day for a word that does not come. "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick," and Sareel was heart-sick and torn by suspense and misgivings. She carried the marks on her face, plain for all to read, drooping lines of pain and suffering etched about the small full mouth, dark circles under the grey eyes, cheeks that were growing hollow and wan.

"Be worritin' 'bout ought?" asked Emma, as she got no answer.

Sareel stirred continuously the bubbling, purple liquid simmering over the fire.

"I be tired aisy, mebbe I be gitting lazy and can't sim to du same as I did."

Emma sniffed derisively.

"Not much chance fer lazy folks where the old dummon is, I reckons," she said succinctly. "Would 'ee like fer me to take 'ee to doctor to Ro-leigh? Mebbe you've got sommut wrong wi'ee. I never see a maiden look so bad all of a suddint as you du."

But Sareel would not hear of seeking medical advice. Emma was quite offended with the emphatic dissent her suggestion aroused, and went off talking enigmatically of "they as med come to be brave and sorry as they didn't listen to folks

as knows a mort more than a young maiden." Sareel was penitent then, and made an excuse to run round after supper to the waggoner's cottage, where Eli sat smoking his pipe by the peat fire while Emma scolded all the family impartially for the transgression of the last baby but two, who had pulled over a kettle and only escaped sudden death by a merciful Providence.

"Most enough to drive a body silly, so they be, and I'll clap the whole lot into bed wi'out no supper if I finds any more mischief same's thickey."

Emma indicated a drenched cradle which had received the contents of the kettle, and Sareel knelt down and took out the wrappings, hanging them up by the fire to dry, and then soothing the last baby but one, who howled lustily at his mother's threats. He was a delicate little fellow, without the hardy robustness of the rest of the large family. He rested his downy head, yellow like a young duckling, against Sareel's breast, while the big tears dropped down from his pale blue eyes over her apron bib. She hushed him with a little song, rocking him to and fro. She was sorry for Jamie. He couldn't fight for himself like the others nor hit back when he was cuffed or smacked. He could only cry.

"Proper cry-baby, Jamie. Look at Jamie," cried one of the twins, pointing a finger at the woebegone little figure in Sareel's arms.

"Let 'un bide," said their mother sharply.

There was no chance to utter the apology that

Sareel had come to make, so she had to relieve her feelings by comforting Jamie and trying to bring a smile to the tearful eyes so pathetically blue. He fell asleep at last, the nodding yellow head quiet against her shoulder, the sobbing breaths hushed. Eli, over his pipe, sat gazing with meditative eyes at the glowing peat fire. He had no small talk and the visitor did not expect him to have any. The heavy tread of the mother overhead moved to and fro as she put the others to bed. There was something in the weight of the sleeping child in her arms, the warm pressure of his soft little body against her own, that dulled for an instant, the merest fraction of time, that ceaseless gnawing pain in the heart of the girl. Jamie sucked his thumb in his sleep. It was a trick that he had often been scolded for, in waking hours. Sareel made no attempt to take it from his button of a mouth. His fair lashes had tears hanging on them. Sareel's own childhood had not been an easy one, but she hated, with an intensity that was like a flame within her, any sight of a child's tears or unhappiness. It hurt her sensitive young soul even through its own burden of wretchedness and unsatisfied waiting.

Emma came downstairs at last, and Sareel gave her the slumbering child.

"Time I was gwine," she said. "I wanted to zay as I didn't mane to be ongrateful 'bout yer offering to take me tu doctor. 'Tis only as I dawn't think there's no need fer't."

"Bless the maid! Ongrateful, dear life!"

laughed Emma, a little incoherently, but none the less pleased with the halting apology and belated testimony to her own sagacity. She stood, with the child in her arms, looking after Sareel up the lane where the fallen elm leaves shone golden where last night's wind had strewn them over the damp surface of the earth. "Gude-hearted maid fer all her queer notions and fancies," she said, shutting the door and coming over to the fire, "but I dawn't like the looks of her, sommut wrong somewhere, I'll lay. I dawn't like the looks of the maid 't all."

Eli grunted. It was his usual contribution to conversation, and his wife's loquacity made up for any lack on his own part. She talked now at great length on the subject of her own keenness in detecting the early signs of fatal illness in relatives and friends, and the dire results that had followed upon the neglect of her own warnings.

It was nearly night as Sareel stood looking for an instant at the moor before she went indoors. The soft blueness of twilight blurred the scene and made it to her eyes lovelier yet under the pale mauve sky that seemed to lean close down to the evening earth, protecting it. The dumb misery that had fastened upon her mind again since leaving Emma's cottage was not lightened by the thought of the dusky beauty before her eyes. It was rather intensified. It thrust the knife in her heart nearer home, and seemed to turn it in the wound.

She went indoors to meet those fixed old eyes

that seemed to fasten upon her face and gloat in satisfaction over something they found there. They scarcely addressed a word to one another nowadays. It was growing a habit to avoid speech. Sareel had waited for a torrent of violence and a storm of accusation with regard to her absence that night on the moor. She had awaited it, calmly, without a tremor or the slightest sensation of alarm. But no word had been spoken, not one, and that strange silence was beginning to tell upon her overstrained nerves. She felt an icy chill creep through her veins at the sight of those crafty, smiling eyes, watching her as a cat watches a mouse.

She was beginning to feel a tinge of alarm. She wondered sometimes if the old woman might be beginning to lose her reason. There was a look of almost insane glee that Sareel often surprised upon her face. She seemed to be chuckling to herself over some secret and greatly amusing joke. She would sometimes rub her withered old hands together as if in satisfaction over it. Sareel now felt relief in the farmer's presence, in his slow speech and homely commonplaceness. She had always known him more her friend than his wife; although there was no actual word or deed of his that had ever stamped him such. But the girl, with her quick intuition and perceptions, had discovered it. She was thankful for that knowledge now. It was like a shaft of sunlight stealing into a dungeon where the air was dark and heavy and the atmosphere evil and ominous.

But all this was as nothing, less than nothing, to her anxiety about the silence of Allan. She told herself that he had seen the impossibility of his plans, that he had realised the gulf between them, had come to grasp its impassability. But even then he might have written, just once, a single letter telling her all. She would not have found it hard to forgive him; though her heart had broken it would have held no tinge of resentment or reproach for him. But the silence, the weeks of long unbroken silence, not a word or sign. How was she going to bear them? Even as he had painted the future that night on the tor her heart had been uneasy, she had wanted to stop him, lest his very certainty might bring a doom upon them. It seemed to her to have fallen already. What could she do? She did not even know his whereabouts. She had been so sure that he would be the first to write that she had not thought of enquiring nor he of telling her. He was gone out of her world, swallowed up and lost to her for ever.

A sense of fate took hold of her, of inescapable avenging nemesis. She wondered if this had been how her unknown father had treated her mother long ago. Had she too hungered and waited day by day, and died without a word or sign? Had she known day after day the cruelty of hope that bloomed only to die again? The weeks of that dreary November, with its drenching rains and mists, its darkness and gloom were no darker nor more wretched than was the heart

of the hopeless girl who was counting their passing.

Her eyes had grown tragic now, those once limpid virginal eyes grey and still as evening pools. There was a look of pain in them habitually, like in those of some tortured tethered animal, dying by inches in sight of food and drink which it cannot reach. Only to know, to be quite sure! She would pray with parched lips. He might at least have written her the truth however hard and brutal it might have been. She could have borne the truth. It would not have been the first time that her young lips had tasted a bitter draught. She would not have shrunk from it if his hand had proffered it.

Then her thoughts would swing away in another direction. Some evil must have happened to him. He was dead. He must be dead. Nothing else but death would have kept him from sending her word of himself. He had been killed, or had died suddenly, and she would never hear anything of him again. She thought of herself growing old in ignorance, with no chance of hearing the truth. There was his sister. How could she reach her? There might be a possibility, and she wondered if she could find in the old desk in the parlour any letter that Allan had written to the farm, by which she might track him or his family.

She even turned over in her mind, so dire was her need, so hungry her desire for news of him, the idea of asking Mrs. Ashplant outright if she could give her Allan Liddle's address. Her heart

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failed her here, however. She knew that even if the old woman possessed it she would never let her have it. The chasm that separated them was deeper and wider every day, growing visibly. There was open enmity now. It gazed out at her from those peering old eyes that followed her about the house and watched her movements and face with crafty intensity.

She plucked up courage once, when they were alone together, to ask the master. She knew that he often answered his wife's letters, being the better "scholard" of the two. He shook his head. "Dawn't mind the direction, an't a kept no letters late along, savin' they as be in the parlour desk, I reckons. Might look dro they there and see what you can find." Then his wife had entered, and by the look in the girl's eyes he had broken off, seeing that further explanation was unwanted. He knew that a word would fire his wife to some blazing explosion of anger or reproach against Sareel, anger that he would rather spare her if possible. He had had a mild sort of liking for her ever since the morning when he had driven her over from Ashstock Union and watched with amused eyes her ecstasy at sight of the moor. He could not make much stand on her behalf against his wife's unrelenting fault-finding. Years of married life had taught him the hopelessness of attempting to change that determined mind. His wife was stronger than himself and he knew it from bitter experience, and never tried to op-

pose her directly in any attitude she chose to adopt.

Sareel made search by candlelight early one December morning. when the door latches had icicles hanging from them, and the pump in the yard was frozen immovable. The tors had on their white caps, and even in the deep coombes the snow lay in blown drifts, where last night's winds had carried it. Sareel's fingers were stiff and numbed, but she turned over the contents of the desk, not missing a single sheet in her eagerness to find what she so ardently longed to discover. There was no clue here, however, only a few dusty papers, memorandum books, a sale catalogue and family mourning cards in great profusion. The wavering light fell flickering across her bent head and on the shimmer of her hair. When she lifted her face it showed drawn and haggard, like the face of one who looks upon that of a dead body. The lips were pressed together in lines of anguish. All the rounded curves and soft lines were now merged into a look of gaunt despair and hopelessness of unavailing sorrow.

The last faint thread had broken, and she was adrift upon a lone and desolate sea. The weight of her disappointment crushed for a moment all conscious thought or pain; for intense suffering mercifully numbs at first the victim upon whom its lash descends. It was so with Sareel now. She went about her tasks as usual, forgetting nothing, omitting no detail of the long day's round. She set meals and put them away, cooked and baked,

washed and cleaned, looked after the dairy with red frozen fingers, which could scarcely feel the chilly surfaces they touched. She never even flinched from those malignant eyes that followed her from place to place. She met them straight, and held their gaze with her own unflinchingly, until the others shifted and finally dropped from her own, discomfited for once by those steady, wretched young eyes.

The old woman was cowering over the fire when a knock sounded and Sareel went out to find the "writer man" from Roleigh standing there, with his breath hanging like steam on the cold air and his fingers too numb to feel the money he tendered for butter. He stepped inside, while Sareel went to the dairy, rubbing his cold hands and refusing Mrs. Ashplant's muttered invitation to come over to the fire.

"No, thanks. I'd only feel it worse going out again. This wind is enough to skin the flesh off one's bones. I've had it cold on the moor before, but never as sharp as this. Even the stream is frozen across the valley, and it is pitiful to see the frozen bodies of the birds lying along the road."

"Ay, 'tis sharp, but I minds a many wuss winters avorettime, zo I du, a plenty colder."

She held out her wrinkled hands to the warmth of the fire, and the man, watching her across the kitchen, saw a sudden change pass across her face, an odd light flash suddenly in the faded eyes, and turning he saw Sareel standing there with his

basket in her hand. He took it with a word of thanks, and went out to buffet with the north wind that swept over the moor.

He pondered long over that strange look that he had surprised on the face of the old woman at the farm. He was interested in psychology, and although material for its study was not abundant with him in his present way of life, the old interest was not dead. Then his mind reverted to the girl.

He had been interested in her ever since his first visit to the farm. He had seen her beauty and marvelled at its unbucolic type. He had never talked much with her, owing to her natural shyness and timidity; but he had heard from Emma, who came over to do a day's cleaning for him occasionally and was an incorrigible gossip, of her unlikeness to the run of "farm maidens" and her odd passion for the moor and the open air.

He had heard her history and the unsolved mystery of her birth from Emma's fluent tongue. He had listened mostly without comment, since such was never necessary for the furthering of Emma's reminiscences at any time. The talk had lingered in his memory, and he turned it over in his mind on his three mile tramp across the winter moor, where, between the snow drifts and the frozen stream, wonderful colours started, those winter colours that lovers of the moor will tell you are never so beautiful nor so softly vivid as at that time of year. Purples and mauves, smoke-grey

merging into blue, under the colourless low-lying clouds, winter ran its gamut in earth and boulder and climbing slopes. Icicles drooped from whortleberry bushes and dwarf hawthorns, and when a faint sun pushed through the greyness overhead they shone many-coloured like pendant jewels, with lights of flashing reds and greens and magic gold.

It was a tragic story, that of the little farm servant; and the face she had shown him to-day matched it with those wide tragic eyes and stiff unsmiling lips. He shuddered as he thought of the girl shut up all day with that old witch of a mistress; and he wondered what had been the reason for the fixed inhuman expression that had crossed her face as the girl stood in the doorway. He had felt at times the evil inimical presence that dwelt here in this lonely place, a presence of something, someone aloof from humanity and human needs and desires, a timeless, spaceless atmosphere that carried the mind back countless ages to the neolithic period. When Stonehenge was reared, the moor before him was ancient in point of time. What were humanity and tiny human interests and experiences in comparison with its age? Man's whole history was the life of a gnat on a summer's day compared with an existence that stretched back far into the dim unfathomed and unfathomable beginnings of the terrestrial globe.

She seemed such a little thing in the vast immensity that surrounded her. Robert Nugent was a man of intense sympathy with all forms of

suffering. Years ago a woman had said of him as long as you were happy and prosperous he never gave you a second thought, but as soon as trouble came he was a devoted and untiring friend. For the first time since he had known of her existence his thoughts hovered over the problem of Sareel, unprompted by the eloquence of Emma. She became an individual to him and not a mere abstraction as she had been previously: a human being obviously unhappy and friendless, and being who and what he was, he longed to help her.

Emma came to scrub the next afternoon, bringing the last baby with her and consigning him to a table-drawer pulled out on the floor—the only substitute for a cradle in that modest bachelor household. The two cottages had been knocked into one, so that there was a good-sized downstairs room with a fireplace at each end, well lighted and spacious. One door had been blocked up. The other led directly in from the garden. The walls were whitewashed, which Emma thought privately “drefful mean-looking and cottagey.” It was kept in its cottage state, with a long black oak dresser against one wall filled with simple blue and white coarse crockery. Rugs of red and black and grey pieces, rag rugs, lay on the stone-paved floor. Over the wide fireplace at one end hung a frill of lilac print in cottage fashion, and beside it stood a high-backed oak settle, black and shining with age and constant use. The only really uncottagelike plenishing were the

books, row upon row of them covering two sides of the room, and the plain oak writing-table in the sun of the window bearing a typewriter and heaped with letters and papers. The casement windows had white curtains with frills along the top. Almost the only concession to modern comfort were the two deep chairs and an old-fashioned sofa covered in chintz that stood between the windows. It was a pleasant home-like place, from the brass candlesticks winking on the high mantel-shelf to the round oak gate-legged table which the owner had picked up at a recent sale in the district.

It was simple and unpretentious. There was a long strip of garden ground at the back that sloped up the hill and had doubtless been filched from the moor in time when rights were less insistent than at present. The little patch in front was gay with flowers in spring and summer. There were herb bushes and rock plants, many found in tramps on the moor and flourishingly mightily in native soil and climate.

Emma thought in her heart that the dweller here was "proper mazed," but she kept her opinion with some difficulty to herself, being loth to imperil good pay and constant employment by any rash criticism of her employer. She looked upon the cottage plenishings as "brave and poor fer gentry use," and wondered why a man who could obviously afford better should choose to live like a cottager and look after himself, eat vegetables and what she contemptuously termed

“spune mate” when he had money enough to buy meat every day in the week if he chose. In fact he lived in general in a fashion that was incomprehensible to a conventionalist like this charwoman.



## CHAPTER X.

Bob Nugent had finished his article for *The Sentinel*, and sat smoking in the patch of sun by the window. There came the sound of Emma's energetic efforts with a pail and scrubbing brush from the scullery. The baby whimpered a little and then was silent, soothed by maternal phrases. Emma pushed open the door and came in, prepared for attack upon the floor. She rolled up the rugs and carried them away, then on her hands and knees she began to wash the stone flags with great swishing movements of bare red arms. Nugent was not thinking about Emma. His thoughts were far away. She cast occasional glances at his absorbed face. She knew that his silence was not unfriendly, but none the less it irked her garrulous soul, and she longed for him to become aware of her presence and make a remark.

He did so at length, and so suddenly that it made her jump and splash the water in the pail.

"What is wrong with that girl over at the farm? Do you know? I never saw anybody so altered in a few weeks as she is. Illness, is it, or that old tyrant of a woman who employs her?"

Emma sat back on her heels, and brushed an end of hair out of her eyes. She was an unlovely figure in her old worn linsey gown with its bulg-

ing bodice and draggled skirt hem. Her eyes lit up. Here was a subject after her own heart, and she attacked it with a lively pleasure, as being an authority upon the subject of Sareel.

"You med well axe, sir. I niver see a maid look so ghastly as her do late along, niver in all my days. There's sommut up wi' her, that'll I lay if 'tis my last breath, so I will," said Emma with solemn asseveration of her statement.

The man sitting on a corner of the writing-table listened in attentive silence and refilled his pipe. He was haunted by the memory of those wistful young eyes, had been haunted by them ever since they had met his own with that look of tense and hopeless agony.

"A wretched sort of a place, I should say. Why don't you advise her to get out of it?"

The floodgates of Emma's eloquence opened then, and a pent-up tide poured out upon the head of her hapless questioner.

"Me advise of her? Why, I've a-done sich time and agen till I'm tired of layin' me tongue to the words. 'Tis slavery, nort else, and zo you'd zay if you did but know the fashion yon old dum-mon trates of her. Mornin', noon and night 'tis work, work, work, and nort but sour words and sourer looks to thank 'ee arter 'tis all a-done, proper vitty, no vay. Her's a strange maid, though, brave and strange, her dawn't see things like other folks, never didn't from the fust. I often times zay to Eli as he be most as bad, stop-pin' to farm year in year out, and the wage

smaller than t'others hereabout, not that the maister be quite so near as thic old missus, but zame kidney, arter all. Thic maid must be proper mazed to put up wi't, proper mazed her must be and that's gospel truth."

Emma returned to the neglected floor washing and was silent for a few moments—not from any lack of ideas but merely from want of breath.

"Mebbe as if you was to spake a word to the maid her med take more notice of gintry." For all Emma's ideas of fitness and propriety, and the sad lack of both in Mr. Nugent's domestic arrangements, she never had any doubt in her own mind as to his social standing.

The man smiled at her phrase and made no answer. Emma continued, her voice rising above the sound of her scrubbing in spite of its low native pitch.

"'Tis my belief as if sommut bain't done avore long the poor maid 'ull make away wi' herself, or go off her head altogether. That's my belief, and I've zaid the same to Eli times wi'out number. 'Mark my words' I've a-said" (she paused and made a dramatic gesture with the scrubbing brush poised in mid-air) "'you mark my words as there'll be sommut bad 'ull come to thic maid. I can't azackly tell 'ee what, but sommut turr'ble,' they was my very words, and I manes it. I dawn't like the looks of her."

"Neither do I," said the listener, getting down from his perch and moving across the room to the fireplace, standing in masculine fashion with

his back to it. "But I'm afraid that she wouldn't be likely to take much notice of what I said. I can scarcely get her to speak a word to me."

"A body never can't tell. I knows her quiet ways, none better. They be her ruin wi' an ole Tartar like the missus. Her do want wan as'll answer back agen, and give as gude as her gits. Sareel's a proper vule, kapin' zo mum and niver standing up fer her rights. I an't got proper patience wi' the maid, that I an't." She scrubbed vigorously for some minutes, adding after an interval: "and yit there's a sommut sort o' nice like 'bout the maid, her's like a cheel in some ways, not a bit more growed-up than a cheel, I zim."

When Emma had finished her work and taken her homeward way with the baby, now yelling lustily, in her arms, the man to whom she had been speaking sat in the dusk over the wood fire thinking of the girl of whom she had told him. It fitted in with his own thoughts of her, of her helplessness and simplicity, and lack of fighting qualities. There was no surer way to Robert Nugent's heart than the path of unhappiness or sorrow. He hated cruelty. It roused his nature to the very depths. It was the cruelty, conscious and unconscious, of modern life that had caused him to turn his back upon the old life and the hubbub of men and cities and make a simple home for himself here.

He had gone through what he had dubbed "the treadmill of his class"—a public school and then

Cambridge. His father was a Somersetshire landowner who had made disastrous speculation, and when his son left college with "a double first" he found that the life of leisure, which he had been kicking against in his thoughts, was no longer possible for him. He had to earn his living. His sister, whom he adored, had to earn hers after her father's death. She went abroad; he drifted into journalism as the easiest method. He wandered over Europe, scribbling as he went and absorbing impressions. Once he got a travelling tutorship and went for twelve months to the East, India and Japan, coming back to the States, where his sister had married a rich man. He stayed there awhile and finally drifted back to England, dissatisfied, lonelier than ever without his sister's companionship. Then his brother-in-law died and he went again to America to help his sister.

For the next two years they were together and happy until she contracted a fatal disease. He brought her down to the moor, and those few months changed his whole life and outlook. Grace and he went into things, her fortune and the disposition of it. She wanted him to have a part of it, the rest of it was her wish should be restored to the makers of it, the workers in that new city in the middle States that had sprung up like a mushroom around the big works. She had a fine head for details, and it was all mapped out to the last item before she went. Men journeyed down to consult with her and to carry out her wishes,

to discuss and suggest, to oppose and argue, and in the end to find that this quiet-eyed woman, with death on her face, was a match for all their arguments. It filled those last months with interest and work, and the man watching welcomed the subject that could ward off the thought of that swiftly approaching end. He was all with his sister in her wish to make what she called "restoration." He helped her and worked as valiantly as herself. He wanted only a small income, one that was honestly got and cleanly come by. She understood and loved him for it.

They lived very near to one another in these last months. He marvelled at the courage of a weak woman, despairing of ever being able to imitate it even faintly. But when the end came the loneliness was at first unbearable, and he went away, back to the old life that he had forsaken so long, among the old friends who had wondered idly what had become of Robert Nugent. He knew then that he was lonelier than ever in the old crowd. His heart pined for the moor again, for the breath of its keen air, the spaciousness of its wide places. He could not live away from it. It called him by night and day. He resolved that he would go back. He would work with his hands and brain and live his own life in his own way, untrammelled by convention and the fetters with which other men may choose to shackle their lives.

From a lad he had always been indifferent to criticism. It meant no effort to him to say good-

bye to Fleet Street and his friends and acquaintances there. They had come to make a mockery of his hatred of capitalism. When they heard that he had refused the fortune that might have been his for the taking, they said that after all he was an honest man though mistaken. They shrugged their shoulders when his name was spoken in his old haunts. He had been no recluse when he lived their life, which made his desertion all the more inexplicable. They prophesied that his experiment would not be long lived, and that he would soon be back, disillusioned, among them once again. He was popular among them, and they forgave him what they termed "his mad notions" for the sake of his good fellowship and his generous nature.

Very few knew the details of his present way of life. He had blown no trumpets on departure, loathing all forms of self-advertisement and laudation, shrinking from the least suspicion of profiting from his new way of living. He had confided in one or two men, who sent him important books to review and accepted his articles regularly. He wrote with a certain fastidious distinction, characteristic of the man, and was beginning to make his name with that discriminating few who can recognise good work among the chaff of modern literature.

He expected to find his life monotonous at first, possibly unendurable for a long period. But he had been surprised to find how well it suited him, how well he suited its freedom and unfettered

hours. The moor, with its ever-changing, ever-constant beauty, laid a stronger hold on him than before. His health was better than it had been for years. After Fleet Street the open air worked wonders. Sleeplessness, that constant spectre at the side of the sedentary brain worker, knew him no more.

After a time a few of his friends sought him out. Occasionally a man came down for a weekend. There was a little guest chamber, often occupied, as simple as the rest of his rooms and as surely comfortable. Men wondered that a man so hospitable as Nugent should "bury himself in these wilds." He smiled when he heard them.

The shadows made by the dancing wood fire played hide-and-seek across the whitewashed ceiling, with its great black oak beam running from wall to wall. The repairs had unearthed that beam and it had been left in all its ancient strength uncovered. They played over the low, book-lined walls and along the shelves of the dresser; stirring reflections from the copper warming-pan and a fine old brass candle box, that he had discovered at a cottage auction the week before.

The vague blue dusk looked in peeringly, and mingled with the uncertain firelight and the flickering shadows about the long room.

The figure in the deep chair by the fire was so still that he might have been asleep. A mouse scuttled away as he moved suddenly, got up, and stretched his arms above his head. He made up



the fire and lit his reading lamp. Then he laid his simple evening meal. When his meal was done he made coffee and its pleasant aroma filled the room, competing with that pervading atmosphere of tobacco never absent here.

He took down a book and settled himself with his pipe to read. The wind had risen and was howling drearily about the sides of the house, shaking the casements and sending sudden showers of blown sparks across the hearth with fierce gusts. The reader looked up from his page. Tonight it held no lure for him. He put it aside and sat gazing into the fire with meditative unseeing eyes. He was thinking of his sister, and of how she would have found some way to help Sareel. She had intuitions that had saved many women from disaster, and impulses that found a way through the most difficult of human tangles. He looked across the room at her portrait. It was a pencil drawing done by an artist friend, a wonderful little picture that had recaptured something of the delicacy and strength of its original. Broad low brow and deep-set eyes with a laugh in their clear depth and a whimsical twist to the small firm mouth. Partly for the sake of this one woman whom he had lived nearest to, and partly because of something sensitive in himself, <sup>pæu æu</sup> a high opinion of women. Years before he had loved a woman who had been faithless, and he had never again thought seriously of marriage; but in spite of this experience the failure had not tinged his life with bitterness. He had thought it due

as much probably to something in himself as to Sybil.

He contrasted them now mentally: Grace with her directness and straight-forward tenderness, Sybil, graceful and low-voiced, with small hands and a slender, lissom body. He had never written much of women. He doubted his power to depict them truthfully, and he shrank from half-truths. Then his thought swung back to the little farm maid with those dumb, tragic eyes. Could he risk an attempt to help her? Dared he make the first step that might send her retreating further still? He turned over in his mind projects, tentative plans, probable opportunities. Then he rejected one after the other as clumsy and doomed to ill success. He must wait for the inspiration of the moment if he should actually decide to speak to her. He would never force a confidence; such a thing was unthinkable to a man of his temperament. But more and more he was coming to the conclusion that he must be the one to try and help his lonely girl. There was a look on her face that told him, without any need of words, that she was nearing the end of her tether, reaching the limit of endurance that sanity sets to each human being.

## CHAPTER XI.

In spite of repeated efforts and various invented missions to the farm, for weeks Nugent could never find an opportunity for a word alone with the girl whose wretched face haunted him. There was always the old woman there, cowering over the fire and watching her with malignant eyes that seemed to rejoice in dwelling upon that pallid, bloodless face and those tense, drawn lips. Even the buoyant step with which Sareel used to move had changed to a dragging tired movement which was obviously an effort. Her bright hair looked limp and lustreless. She no longer took any pride in it.

The winter was a long one, longer even than moor winters are wont to be. Snow lay for weeks on the ground, and even when it disappeared from the earth it remained in little ledges and crevices of the tors and slopes "waiting for more," as the country folk say. There were unbroken weeks of hard frost, when the ground was like iron and everything seemed dead and sere. Those were hard times. The cattle had to be fed in the yard. The wells were frozen. Daily life was a greater burden than ever, the commonest task now was laborious past all belief as one attacked it with frozen fingers. The searching north-east wind found its way everywhere be-

tween the casements and under the doors. Even Nugent's warm cottage at Roleigh felt the force of it, and its inhabitant, who was a sun-lover and loved warmth like a cat, shivered over a mighty fire and wondered why he had been so keen to experience what Stevenson calls "the needs and hitches of life."

He left the fireside and tramped long miles over the hard frozen ground, beating his arms across his breast to keep sensation in numbed fingers, meeting scarcely anybody mile after mile, but finding the clear sparkling air as invigorating as wine, his blood tingling in his veins like that of a boy once more. There was hardly a sign of wild life to be seen. The stream ran 'a narrowed course, its margins ice, only the central ripples moving slowly over the grey stones. Every bit of low growing bough and branch was a delicate tracery of hoar frost, the work of faery fingers, finely wrought.

He sang as he went, and the echoes of his song floated back to him from the empty loneliness of the winter world. As he came down the valley he met an old man carrying sticks on his shoulder. A line of orange sky glowered in the west.

"I reckons 'twill be a sharp night agen, maister," called the old man in a quavering voice as Nugent overtook him.

"Looks like it."

"Ay, mostlike, brave and sharp, I reckons,"

the old gaffer went on with the reiteration of the slow-witted.

"I can take your bundle part way." Nugent took it from the old man's bent shoulder and hoisted it on his own. The man laughed, a cackling laugh of surprise and straightened his back.

"Dawn't oftentimes git a help wi' faggots," he said; "can't carry 'em zame's I used, can't expect to seein' as I be up seventy-dree year and more."

"That's good age to get out and about," said Nugent, offering the old fellow his pouch. The man refused it with a protesting shaking hand, gnarled and twisted like an ash sapling.

"Thank'ee kindly, young maister. Niver didn't care fer thickey sort o' trade, thank'ee."

When the old man had turned off and retaken his bundle of sticks, Nugent found himself half a mile out of his way, with the long low line of huddled roofs of the farm lying before him. He wanted some butter, and scarcely thinking of the girl who had been so much on his mind of late, he struck across the open ground in the direction of the farm.

Lights were beginning to twinkle fitfully at a lower window. He opened the gate and went up the path. His knock resounded as in an empty untenanted house, and, after waiting some minutes without result, he knocked again. A dog barked out at the back, and at last steps were heard. The door was unbolted—it was rarely used in winter—and Sareel appeared in the doorway.

Her sleeves were rolled up past her elbow, showing the white flesh beyond the red and purple wrist and arm.

"I was out to the back and didn't hear 'ee till Pete barked," she said apologetically.

Nugent stepped inside the stone-paved passage.

"I seem always wanting butter from you," he laughed wondering if they would find the old woman cowering over the kitchen fire. "I haven't started a cow of my own yet, and Emma hasn't been over this week to bring me my usual supply."

The kitchen was empty, nobody sat in the high-backed chair. The fire had died down to a heap of fluffy white ashes. Sareel threw on some slabs of peat. She was turning to go to the dairy when a hand on her shoulder arrested her, a kindly detaining touch, and in a low voice Nugent said quickly, as though expecting every minute to be interrupted:

"Wait a minute. I have been wanting to speak to you. You look so ill. I wondered if there was anything I could do to help you. You look unhappy, troubled. I hope you will not resent my speaking to you in this way, only I thought that perhaps you had not many friends. Sometimes a stranger can help when others close to are powerless. That's all my excuse for saying this to you. It has often struck me that you have a hard, solitary life of it here, with no one of your own age for company."

He saw her flinch and go whiter still, ashen.

She steadied herself with a hand upon the settle and gazed at him with wretched eyes, not a gleam of hope in their grey depths.

"You must forgive me if I seem to thrust myself into your affairs unwanted," he went on, as she made no reply. "I may sound so to you, doubtless. It was only that I saw you were unhappy, and somehow that always makes me forget everything else, my manners for instance, and other people's dislike of intrusion. Emma has spoken to me of you occasionally. You know what a gossip she is, I suspect. So that you do not seem quite a stranger to me, although I must to you. I daresay you do not even know my name."

He broke off and moved toward her, for she swayed and would have fallen if he had not caught her and helped her to the settle. He saw her breast heaving under the work-stained bodice, and she began to try to speak. She put up her hand to her throat, but the words choked her utterance and would not come. Her mouth quivered. She made another effort and then she fell forward across the round table, her head on her outstretched arms, while great tearless sobs shook her from head to feet, rending sobs as those of a being past all power of pretence.

He knelt down on the stones beside her and rouched her hand gently. She did not withdraw it.

"Can't you tell me what is wrong? That is, if it will comfort you to speak. Words do help sometimes, you know."

She shook her head, her face still hidden, but the sobs had ceased. She was crying quietly, hopelessly, under her breath. He could never bear a woman's tears, and they were agony to him now. The desire to help this friendless, unhappy child rose within him stronger and more urgent than before.

"Perhaps because I am a man you feel you cannot speak," he went on in his quiet sympathetic voice. "I think I understand that. Yet you know men can often confide in women what they would never say to another man." He was talking at random, saying the first thing that came into his head. But it reached her and she lifted her tear-stained face.

"Ay, there was wan I could say aught to, wance. Thee mustn't think I take yer spaich amiss. 'Tis brave and kind. I an't got many friends. I dawn't see why for you should trouble about me. There was wan as went . . . promisin' to write me, axin' me to write 'ee, and I've niver got a word, not wan. 'Tis nigh breakin' me heart not to know, to wait and wait and fancy what med have come to harm'n."

Her voice was no more than a whisper in his ear, but so intent was she upon it, so engrossed the man who knelt by her side listening, that neither heard approaching heavy steps nor saw the door open slowly and the old woman standing there watching them with evil eyes in which the malice was no longer furtive and concealed, but a raging vivid flame. She did not move for several



seconds, her ears strained to catch that feeble, failing voice. Then, with a sort of muffled roar, she betrayed her presence and moved forward.

Sareel gave a sharp cry and Nugent rose from his knees and faced her.

"Zo she's fulin' you as she've fuled a many men! I've a zin it time arter time, gintry and common, 'tis all alike to a maid like her, no better'n a strate woman, not wan bit. She's bad dro and dro—rotten, fer all her meek ways and her gert eyes like a baby's. I've a-watched her and I've a zin the truth. What can 'ee expect of vrom a maid rared as her was rared, what can 'ee wonder when her turns out as her mother did avore her, a trollop . . . a——." The angry vindictive old voice rose and cracked.

At the sound of her mother's name on those lips Sareel gave a low cry and turned to the man beside her with a little imploring gesture, like that of a child who holds out its hands to its mother. He put his arm about her shoulder protectingly. The old eyes watching them flashed fire again, and their owner laughed shortly, a brutal, coarse, insufferable laugh. She would have burst out again in torrential abuse had not Nugent stopped her with an authoritative gesture that compelled her silence.

"Be silent. I will hear no more of this talk, or if there is more I will appeal to the law for protection for a helpless girl whose character is defamed by your vile insinuations. What right have you to taunt and goad her like this? If she is not

respectable, why did you keep her under your roof? Why have you kept her? You know why, and so do I and others too, it is because you have worked her like a slave, for a low wage, that's why. I suppose that's the reason that you hate her, because she has served you faithfully. Anyhow she'll serve you no longer. I will see to that."

"You'll take her away, you? I'll have the law of 'ee, mind that, I'll have the law of 'ee. You durstn't do't. Not you! Or if you do I'll tell volks what you be. There's only wan reason why a gentleman takes trouble over a girl like yon, only wan, and you knaw what 'tis, and so do I." She pointed an avenging finger at the girl still clinging to him. "Look at her. That shaws the sort her is. You dawn't want no more'n that. I'll publish it everywhere. I'll tell volks what sort of a gintleman you be, a gintleman indade to come and stale a maid vrom a gude place, and to talk same fashion as you hath a-done to me, a purty gintleman you be, and no mistake, a brave fine gintleman!"

He made no answer beyond a glance of contemptuous indifference. Then he turned to Sareel.

"What wages does she pay you?"

"Nine pounds a year."

"Go upstairs and put your things together. I'll wait here for you."

He put her from him gently and she went up the steep stairs, fearful, not in the least understanding his meaning. He pulled money from his

pocket and laid it down on the table between them:

"That's more than the month's wages due to you," he said calmly; "you are lucky to get as much."

"I'll not have it. I'll kape the maid her month, I tull 'ee. I'll not let her go. Her shall bide on her month. I'll not let her go."

"Oh yes you will. There is no help for it," said that steady unruffled voice.

The old woman raged on.

"Where be takin' her tu? I'll know thicky. I'll not have the maid gwine off wi' a gintleman like you unbeknownst. Bain't respectable, bain't daycint."

"I thought that was what you had just been telling me, that she was not respectable, in which case apparently it doesn't matter where she goes, does it? At least I shouldn't have thought so."

Then his face changed swiftly and he spoke in quite another tone, earnest and emphatic.

"Look here. I mean no harm to the girl. I am an honest man, and you know it. I shall take as much care of her as though she were my sister. Grasp that fact, for it is the truth."

"Sister!" sneered the other, "sister! that's a likely packet to zell a-body, that is."

"It is the truth, though, as it happens, and you had better credit it or things will only prove more uncomfortable for yourself. If I hear of any gossip on your part, any more evil tales circulated by you against her, and if you do utter them I most certainly *shall* hear, well then I shall take

action against you. If you cannot understand plain words you had better ask your husband their meaning. You may be forgiven the harm that you have tried to do an innocent girl; I personally should find it hard to forgive you."

He heard Sareel's step on the stairs above. She was carrying the blue and white paper-covered box that she had brought from the workhouse four years before. She had on her coat and hat. He helped her carry the box across the kitchen. At the door she turned, hesitated, dropped her end, and came back to face the implacable old shrew who stood watching her with a face that twitched with passion.

"Good-bye," she said breathlessly. "I never thought as I should lave 'ee like this. 'Tis all so suddint and unbeknownst." She held out her hand timidly.

"'Tis a put-up job. I an't blind eyes. Gude riddance to 'ee, I zay, and may you be trated same fashion as you've trated me. Gude riddance to bad rubbish."

Sareel turned away. Her mind was in a whirl. Below her unhappiness stirred for an instant the exhilaration of the unknown.

They went across the shadowy cobble-stoned yard and out at the gate, carrying the little trunk between them.

"Let me have it, I can manage it quite easily."

But Sareel stuck to her end. They went along the lane toward Emma's cottage. Neither spoke for a time. Then Robert Nugent said:

"I am going to ask Emma to let you stay with her until we see what it is best to do for you. Never fear but I shall be able to find a plan. At least you will be out of the clutches of that old horror."

Emma was giving her brood their tea. She started and then shrieked with surprise when she saw who waited in the shadow of the doorway, the queer little box between them.

"'Tis never Sareel! Dear life! and Mr. Nugent along wi' her. There! I be all in a muddle and the children as crabby as can be, little toads!" They were crowding about their mother's skirts now, shyly, and Jamie, the little weakly one with the pale blue eyes, smiling with his thumb in his mouth at his friend Sareel.

"I want a word with you," said Nugent, and Emma, pushing away the children, went out to him in the dusky lane.

Sareel went over to the fire, the small confiding hand of little Jamie tucked in her own. She felt suddenly very tired and weak. She sat down on the settle, the children clustering all about her, asking questions, why she had come, where she was going in her best clothes, how long she was going to stay? She was too tired even to speak.

She shut her eyes and then she opened them again, for Mr. Nugent was standing over her.

"Emma says you may stay here. I shall come over to-morrow and see how you are. Don't worry. Things will come out all right. You look so tired. Send her to bed soon, Emma."

He took her hand an instant in his firm strong clasp, and was gone. Emma slipped something into her pocket as she saw him out, and he disappeared rapidly up the lane with his long strides.

"My dear life!" she said, as she made Sareel drink a cup of tea, "give me a reg'lar turn, that it did, to see 'ee standing there onexpected like, a proper turn! Well, you've bin and done it to last, and I dawn't blame 'ee, nayther."

Then Sareel startled them all by letting the cup and saucer slip out of her hand, and fainting off suddenly, while her friend Jamie, afraid that she was dead, began to howl lustily. Before she had recovered consciousness Eli came home from work. The children ran to meet him, all talking at once, about Sareel coming and her lying as white as death along the settle indoors. Emma did what she could to restore her, and at last the long eyelashes fluttered. Consciousness was coming back. She sat up with a dazed look in her eyes, while Emma talked volubly to her husband, the children, and the visitor, all in one breath.

For the rest of the evening Sareel sat very white and silent, with Jamie cuddled in her arms. Jamie was in the seventh heaven, because he was going to sleep with his friend. It meant a tight squeeze to fit another sleeper into the accommodation of the already overflowing cottage, with only two bedrooms and an attic.

When Emma had coaxed her upstairs and had filled a cider jar with hot water for her feet, she came back to Eli smoking over the fire.

"What could a body du but axe of her to bide?" she asked her husband, as though answering an already spoken question.

He knocked out the ash of his clay pipe against a log, and gazed at the fire with ruminating eyes and a gloomy face.

"I knaw when ole missus hears on't there'll be a brave fine row," he said, after a long pause.

Emma's face was troubled.

"Ees, I reckon there will," she said, frightened for the moment out of her accustomed garrulity. "'Twill be notice fer 'ee most-like if us do kape of her long" (Eli nodded) "and us 'll have to lave hereabouts. Maister bain't so bad as missus, but he'll not stand agen her, I reckon."

"Not he," said Eli, laconically, and he gazed at the fire again with moody sombre eyes, as though he saw there the eviction of himself and family for the championing of Sareel.

It was the visitor herself who thought likewise as she lay awake, with the warm body of the sleeping Jamie pressed close to her own, and the steady breathing of the other children rising and falling in the silence of the night. She had turned one out of his bed. She knew that she could not remain under Emma's roof for long. They were too straitened for room to permit long visits. Besides, the Ashplants would not countenance her being here. She felt sure of that. It would only make things harder for Eli. She could not do that. It would not be fair. She must tell Mr. Nugent these things the next day. A gentleman

would scarcely be likely to think of them himself.

She would have to find another place. Her heart sank. She would be obliged to begin again with strangers, fresh faces, fresh surroundings, away from the moor she loved, the moor with its memories bitter and sweet, the land that had been a friend to her. She thought of the only other dwelling she had ever known, the cheerless dreary workhouse. The matron whom she had known was dead or she might have written to her for advice. Then she thought of Allan. He would never be able to find her now, never, not even if his heart relented and he came here again to ask her forgiveness for the long heart-breaking silence, for the breaking of his word to her. That was the hardest thought of all. The slow tears fell down her cheeks. Whichever way she looked life was grey and hopeless. There seemed no brightness anywhere, no hope of sunnier days. Mr. Nugent had been kind. She thought of his courageous words to Mrs. Ashplant, the way he had faced and answered her cruel slanderous accusations, flinging them back again, disbelieving them, for all that he was almost a stranger to her. She could never have stood up herself to that brutal lying accusation; though it was like a whip laid across her face even now in retrospect, she could not have found the courage to protect herself. She had found a protector, a miraculous unexpected friend. There was a break between the clouds here, a little rift that let in a ray of light on her darkness. She said a prayer for him,



that he might not think her the sort of girl that the missus had dubbed her. She shuddered at the mere thought.

She had been taught to pray at the workhouse. There had been dreary services on Sundays, but the idea of God given her there had not been an attractive one. She had found a better and a holier for herself, out of doors, under the wide sky that He had made, on the earth that was His handiwork, the moor that He had given her. She had never put the thought into words before. She had never gone much to any place of worship. The churches and chapels were so far away. There had never been any time for them. No clergyman visited the farm from one year to another. But now, in her extremity of need, she prayed passionately with all the fervour of her sore young heart.

“O God help me. Don’t let me go where Allan can never find me. Bring him back to me. Don’t let Mr. Nugent believe those wicked things of me. Show him that I am not bad, like she said.”

Meanwhile Nugent was revolving much the same problem as he sat late into the night smoking and watching the fire and wondering what on earth he was going to do to help the girl, whom it seemed that he had left stranded for all his goodwill to aid her. He knew from Emma’s manner that it would not be an easy matter for her to stay there indefinitely. He had given her money for Sareel’s keep; but there were evidently other difficulties. His brow clouded as he lit another

pipe. If only Grace had been here now! Then all difficulties would have been smoothed away. She would have had Sareel here, helped her to forget her sordid past, made life brighter for the girl, given her the sunshine of things for a time. He puffed away at his pipe meditatively. If only life were simpler she might have come to him as his visitor. But he knew that even on the moor tongues would wag. He was careless enough of his own, but Sareel's reputation would be gone for ever. He thought of the vile words he had heard that afternoon and of the girl's protesting face. That could not be. His must be the hand to loosen, not add another burden. Naturally impatient of convention or the world's opinion, there was someone else to think of; and it was of her that he had to think. He jumped to his feet, and paced up and down the long room as was his custom when perplexed. To and fro, up and down, he walked from fire to door and back again a hundred times with furrowed brow and restless searching eyes.

Then he flung himself back in his chair. Why not ask the girl to marry him? Wouldn't that solve the difficulty? It was as though a voice had asked these questions aloud in the quiet of the firelit room, where the reading lamp cast a circle of light by his chair with the rest of the room in shadow. Why not? He thought of her halting confession, her weeping talk of one who had disappointed her and sent her no word. He was some faithless bucolic sweetheart, no doubt. They

had both, then, had some experience of failure. Perhaps it might help them to understand one another all the more intelligibly.

He could not offer her love, passion was dead in him; besides, he was so much older than herself; but a home, companionship, protection, shelter and the quiet affection that a life together would doubtless develop, these gifts were not to be despised. She was a gentle young thing with the wistful beauty of youth that touches the heart. She might blossom out like a flower in the sort of life that he could offer her, the freedom from laborious toil and harshness. The idea captured his fancy. He pictured her sitting opposite across the hearth. There had been always something lacking to complete his home. He had felt it unmistakably in many a lonely hour, perhaps it was a woman! Why not? She had such a quiet voice and gentle ways. He would tend her and bring the vanished roses back to her cheeks, the light again to her eyes, the spring to her step.

It was not the way that, as a young man, he had thought of marriage with the adored one. There was no thrill about this looking forward, no quickening pulse and stir of imagination. He had done with that, he told himself. It was all laid away with youth and the wild and evanescent dreams of youth. With her it might be otherwise. He must seem so terribly middle-aged and uninspiring to nineteen or so, as she must be. She might have none of his schemes, reject them incontinently and choose rather to go out and face

the world for herself in her own way. Yet there was nothing of the fighter in the child, no hint of a capacity for resistance or struggle. Still, none the less, she might easily disdain the offer of a man so many years older than herself, one with such differing aims and ancestry. It was better to be quite candid with oneself and to realise that a deep gulf might yawn between them and their destinies, perhaps—if she chose so to regard it—an impassable one.

Then he thought suddenly that there was no other woman in all the world whom he would willingly ask to share his life under its present conditions. A vision flashed across his mind of Sybil, his old love, dainty, graceful, provocative Sybil. He laughed at the impossible conjunction of Sybil and a cottage, Sybil and himself with his present views and ideas. No! If she would have him there was no manner of doubt whatever that Sareel would suit him better far than that, would fit more neatly into his life without either jar or difficulty. Would she? Was it very audacious or quite mad of him to consider the project? He turned over the two questions alternately, inclining first to one side and then the other as the mood took him.

He came to the very definite conclusion that, whatever her answer might prove, it would be better to put the question without delay. He would walk over to Emma Vicary's in the morning and take her on the moor so that they might be alone together. The cottage kitchen was not a

very promising *mise-en-scène* for an offer of marriage. He must try, too, not to startle her. If she would be his wife they would be married without delay. He had but the haziest of notions how such a thing was possible with any rapidity. Any country lawyer, however, would be able to enlighten him. They would be married and come straight back home here.

He laughed again at the rush and impetuosity of his imaginations, his ringing boyish laugh rousing the echoes of the long low room. It was all so sudden, as the old-fashioned maiden used to protest. His lips twitched. How surprising life was after all, even in a remote place like this, far away from the currents of men and matters. Well, fate had caught him now in the most unexpected fashion, in a way that a few hours previously he would have deemed fantastic and improbable. How surprising a man's self could be! He mused over that trite reflection for some time, wondering a little at the stir within himself. What was it, expectancy, the thrill of a new experiment, the lure of the unknown? He could not tell. He could only feel it throbbing in his veins and setting his fancy dancing, his heart awake again, like that of the impulsive, impressionable youth who he could never be again.

He thought of his sister. There was the fund that she had left for him to use as he liked, to help anyone, man or woman, as the need arose. He could offer her money or use it on her behalf without directly offering it, which would probably

be the better plan. But the project did not tempt him. It was too prosaic and matter of fact with that tingling new sense in his every nerve. It seemed almost an insult to think of money in connection with Sareel. He could not do so, at least not to-night; to-morrow, perchance, when she had definitely cast aside his other idea, it would be time enough to consider it and her future. To-night the rainbowed visions of his inner self forbade the practical commonplace attitude that a man of his years and experience might have been expected to take.

## CHAPTER XII.

Bob Nugent was having his bath the next morning in the second wash-house which served as a bathroom when he heard a knock at the door.

"Go in and wait. I'll not be long," he shouted, and ten minutes later he emerged with his face glowing, to find Emma busily engaged in laying his breakfast table.

She was very apologetic for her early appearance, and wore a dejected look.

"You just sit right down to yer meal, and I'll go up over stairs and make yer bed. I'll tull 'ee what I be come fer afterwards."

The simple meal was soon finished, and the master of the cottage was smoking his pipe over the fire when she reappeared.

She began at once to speak of Sareel and the difficulty of keeping her any longer. She refused all invitations to sit down, and insisted upon standing between the two doors, in the draughtiest position in the room, while she explained the danger to Eli and the chance of being turned out of the cottage if it were discovered that they were harbouring Sareel.

"I never thought of that aspect of the case before," said Nugent. "Perhaps I oughtn't to have suggested her coming to you, but to tell the

honest truth I couldn't think of anything else on the spur of the moment."

"A gentleman like you wouldn't think o' sich things, in course not. But that's jest how 'tis, and I told Eli as I should walk over and spake 'ee staight out fust thing and axe what us had best to do about't!"

After being for so long the doughty champion of rebellion it was rather humiliating to have to climb down in this ignominious fashion. Emma felt it acutely, and looked a most woebegone figure, from the limp feather in her very dusty black hat to her muddy boots.

"I've been thinking over things myself," continued Nugent; "and I've got a sort of plan to suggest, if Sareel will fall in with it. I think I'll walk over with you and hear what she says. Wait while I get on my boots."

"I'd rather go on fust and tidy up the place a bit vitty, if you dawn't mind, sir," said Emma. "I'll pack off the chillern to schule, and then they won't be worrittin' of 'ee, so tiresome like."

Nugent assented, reflecting that for all his present mode of life he was by no means familiar with the proper visiting hours for cottagers nor the shifts that a woman like Emma was put to daily. He agreed, however, that Sareel must not stay and complicate things for her hosts, and Emma started homeward somewhat cheered by his ready understanding of the difficulty of her position.

It was raining as he started out an hour and a half later, a thick fine mist that blotted out the



landscape and shed a common greyness over sky and earth alike. He buttoned his coat against the dampness, and thanked Emma for her forethought in clearing the cottage for action. It would have been difficult in weather like this to saunter on the moor and keep one's teeth from chattering as one formulated a marriage proposal. Then he laughed at himself in a fashion characteristic, and thought how different an aspect plans can take in the cold grey morning light instead of at night, when the most fantastic ideas may assume the air of sober probability. The only thing to do, if Sareel would have none of him, was to take her to the country town ten miles away, and leave her in charge of some respectable woman to look out for another situation. But that project made no appeal to him, and he hastened his pace and got to the cottage in the lane to see Emma leaving it at the other end with a baby in her arms, wheeling another in a little mail-cart.

Sareel came to the door as soon as he knocked. She was expecting him, for Emma had told her that he was coming to talk over the future with her. He took off his damp overcoat, and sat down opposite her across the hearth. She looked pale and tired, with a lifeless air about her, as though even talking was an effort to her this morning.

He spoke at first of indifferent topics, the mist that had come on so swiftly, the sudden thaw, and then of herself.

"How are you this morning? I suppose yesterday and its excitement tired you out. You look fagged to-day."

She put aside the reference to herself.

"Did Emma tell you that I can't bide on with her here?"

"Yes, she told me this morning. I ought to have thought of the risk to them from Mrs. Ashplant's malicious and vindictive nature. It will certainly be better for you to go elsewhere. I want to speak to you of—what you may think a strange proposal."

He hesitated, looked about him at the poorly furnished cottage kitchen, at the signs of poverty, and then back at the girl across the hearth. She was waiting for his explanation obviously without interest or impatience; just waiting for the words he had come to say to her with an almost impersonal indifference, as though they concerned somebody else. Her hands were clasped in the lap of her coarse gown. Her head was a little bent, so that the pearly grey light from the window behind her lit up the sheen of her hair. It was a shining glory among the drab and worn things of this cottage room where all spoke of toil, of constant effort, and ill success.

"I want to ask you if you will marry me?"

The words dropped into the quiet room like a stone thrown into a still pool.

Sareel started, looked up at him, and then away as a vivid flush covered her face from neck to brow.

"Oh!" She gave a protesting cry as though someone had struck her a sharp blow.

He did not wait for her answer but plunged again into speech.

"I know it startles you. You think that I am too old, perhaps. I must be nearly twenty years older than you. There is this difference in our ages, and nothing can change it. I shall understand, quite understand, if you say that this is an impossible idea of mine, that you cannot even take time to consider it. But I sat up last night thinking of this . . . and of you, and of what I could offer you. They are not great things, and yet they sometimes go a long way to making a woman happy, a home, someone to protect you, be a companion to you, live near you, a simple home in the midst of the land you have told me you love best of all, freedom from the hard work that you have known, freedom for yourself. I should not exact much of you. It is not my way. I should want you to have all the liberty you wished . . . always. It is the only way of life for self-respecting men and women, in my idea."

She was listening now with every part of her. If he had spoken once of love, of more intimate feelings, she would have stopped him with a gesture. She could not have borne that. But of this he said nothing. He had spoken of all those things that she had once so ardently longed for, the open air, freedom, liberty, a home, a man to cherish her. These were the very gifts that would once have stirred her blood and set it dancing. They

did not move her now, except to a dim reflection of what might have been. They were abstractions to her, but pleasant, not unwelcome, abstractions none the less. She pondered them with musing eyes, clasping and unclasping the hands in her lap.

At last she found her voice. She raised her eyes to his.

"Why do you axe me this? You offer me these things. What can I give?"

"Many things. You can be to me a companion, a housemate, a helper. I never thought to marry, but I have often felt lately the loneliness of my present life. If you come to me that will be at an end as long as it contents you. I could never keep you against your will, never, whatever happens. I want you to understand that quite clearly. There is no bond to me that counts beside the voluntary one, nor ever could."

"But I be differn born to you, I might bring shame to 'ee belike."

He smiled.

"I think not. I am willing to take the risk of that. We shall not have much to do with the world, you and I, if you consent. Another woman might shrink from the isolation, the loneliness, but you, who know what it means, will not find it strange or difficult."

"Nay, I'd not that. I can't zee plain why 'tis you axe me, seein' as I've got to lave here. There's other places I could go."

"But I ask you to come to me. I do not want to urge you against your will. I could not do that.

Suppose I go to Sanstow to-day and get you lodgings there, and you can have time to think things over properly?"

"I can't abide strange places," she said simply. "I'll come to 'ee willing, so as you be spakin' truth. I'll do all as I can to keep your place nice. I'll try and larn yer ways in time. Mebbe you'll tache me what you can. There's nort as I'll not try fer to know in time."

"We will learn of one another, child." He took her hand in his. It was a strangely plighted troth. "You will have much to teach me too. 'Tis long since I have known a woman's ways under my roof. You know my cottage?"

"Ay, I've passed it manys the time, but niver been inside."

"We won't wait long. I must find out how soon we may be married. I fancy there are rapid methods of managing it, if one knows how. I must leave you to break the news to Emma"—he smiled at the thought of the torrent it would evoke—"she's been a good friend to both of us."

She watched him from the doorstep, disappearing in the rain. It was all unreal that he had said to her, mist-like, vapourish, unbelievable. It was all part of that strange dream which had enveloped her almost ever since she had left the farm. All things seemed far away, reaching her across some distance; voices, thoughts, actions, the present and the future alike merged in that one grey unreality.

If anything could have pierced the mists it

might have been the good Emma's ejaculations, surprise, congratulations, tears, smiles, talk, ceaseless talk, all mingled together inextricably and reiterated for the remainder of the day. Sareel's hostess had a pleasing sense of having been the prime instigator of this astonishing betrothal, the god in the machine who had brought it all about; though as a matter of fact she had never, of course, as much as dreamed of it, not even in her wildest flights of imagination. Had she not often spoken to Mr. Nugent of Sareel and her hardships at the farm, thereby arousing his sympathy and interest? Had she not brought him over that very morning, and doubtless precipitated the proposal? Emma was simply dying to hear every smallest detail; but the bride to be, with that dismaying unconquerable reticence of hers—a reticence for which her hostess could have taken her by the shoulders and shaken her, for all her friendliness—said very little except the bare statement of fact; that Mr. Nugent had asked her to marry him, that she had consented, and that he had gone to Sanstow to see how soon it would be possible. With Jamie cuddled in her lap she sat over the fire, gazing into its depths with faraway eyes, scarcely hearing the questions, comments, and prophecies that Emma poured forth in an ever-increasing torrent.

“Wull there, 'tis a brave gude match fer 'ee, and no mistake. I'd niver have gived 'ee credit fer getting a husband thickey fashion all of minute, so to spake. Niver was so took a-back in all

me days, niver! Could a-knocked me down wi' a feather. Whatan Eli'll zay I dunno."

Sareel could not imagine her host, whatever his astonishment, saying a great deal.

"'Twill take the ole dummon back a bit, I reck-  
ons," continued Emma triumphantly.

Before Eli's return home in the evening, Robert Nugent reappeared, very wet and muddy from his long tramp. He had obtained the license, or at least news that it would be forthcoming on the morrow. They could be married the next day. He suggested that Sareel should stay the night before at a lodging in Sanstow, meet him there in the morning, and then they could be married forthwith and go straight back to Uphill.

"It's too bad weather to hang about, better get home as soon as possible to our own fireside, don't you think?" he said, his eyes on Sareel.

She agreed readily. She would have agreed to any plan of his.

Emma was agog.

"But the day arter to-morrer. What about her clothes, new wans to be married in?"

Nugent laughed.

"We must put up with the old. I don't think Sareel will object, and I am quite sure that I shall not."

Emma was plainly shocked here, and when the bridegroom-elect had plunged out again into the wet night she shook her head solemnly over his flippancy.

"Niver didn't hear tell of a maid gettin' mar-

ried in old clothes. Bring 'ee bad luck 'twould, fer sure, brave bad luck. Didn't ought to be. Why ever didn't 'ee spake up and tell 'en zo?"

Sareel smiled dimly over the sleepy flaxen head against her breast. What did new clothes, marriage the day after to-morrow, prophecies of bad luck, or, in fact, anything matter in this eerie misty mood that had taken hold of her and refused to be shaken off? Emma shook her head several times, and related dismal stories of mischances at weddings, that had one and all ended in dire misfortune in course of time upon either bride or bridegroom. Sareel was unimpressed. Emma's constant flow of chatter tired her oddly to-night, tired her so that she could not listen nor find intelligible monosyllables with which to answer at intervals. The pauses grew longer, and Emma more talkative than ever.

Sareel rose at last, offering to put Jamie to bed. She carried him upstairs, cuddled close in her arms. In spite of her inertia there was a vague consolation in the nearness of that warm childish body and the clasp of those thin fingers over her own. She washed him and brushed his downy head, and then he knelt down and put his tiny hands together saying his prayers at her knee:

"If I should die avore I wake  
I pray as God me sawl may take."

He hopped into bed like a little sparrow, while Sareel moved about the room, folding his clothes



neatly, putting his little shoes together, and finally sitting on the bed beside him and patting him off to sleep in a way much objected to by the practical Emma, who often deplored what she called "sich proper ole crams." Long after the heavy eyelids dropped to the wan cheek her hand moved gently up and down, as she crooned the child to sleep.

She heard Eli's heavy step and the murmur of his slow voice downstairs, the talk and laughter of the other children and the clatter of knives and plates, the scraping of chairs over the stone floor, with Emma's vociferous tones dominating all other sounds. It was cold here, draughts blew in from the badly fitting window. There were damp patches along the walls, and as there was no door—the stairs leading straight down to the kitchen—sounds from below were plainly audible. The rhythm of her beating hand and the low croon of the lullaby at last had a hypnotic effect upon herself. Her eyes closed, her head drooped forward. She slept with Jamie, and dreamed of herself and Robert Nugent trying to reach one another across a deep impassable stream. Then in dream fashion he turned into Allan Liddle. She held out her arms to him unavailingly. The stream between them grew wider and became a rushing torrent.

She awoke with a start, trembling in every limb. Was it indeed Allan Liddle whom she had promised to marry? But no, he had never written to her, never given one sign. He had forgotten her, and she had promised to marry Mr. Nu-

gent the day after to-morrow. She had never, in her wildest dreams, really expected Allan actually to marry her. She felt that she was putting no barrier between them by becoming Robert Nugent's wife. But if he ever should remember her again she would be here for him to find. She would not be swallowed up in a strange town among strange people. If he came she would still be here waiting. . . . Mr. Nugent had not spoken of love; he would not be likely, she told herself, to love anyone like herself. He had talked of a home, companionship, protection. There was something quietly strong about him that told her he would not speak lightly of these things, nor offer them carelessly. She could give him all he asked of her—service, companionship, and faith.

A part of her was dead now. She had no keen sensations of anything, neither regret nor anticipation. But she would not take without giving. That would not be fair. What he required of her she would give him willingly, without a protest. It was the bargain she made with herself. She could not put it into words to him. She had no gift for explanation. But in the silence of the night that resolve was registered deep in her own heart.

## CHAPTER XIII

Two days later the married pair had come home. It was a cheerless day, enough to damp the spirits of the most hilarious. There was no lift in the air, nothing but grey mists and dropping dampness everywhere. Nugent had suggested hiring a conveyance from Sanstow, but Sareel would not hear of such extravagance, and they had tramped back over the sodden moor, and reached the cottage with rain dripping garments and soaked boots.

"I'll soon get a good fire going," said Nugent cheerfully. He brought in great armfuls of ash logs and made a mighty one. "You must get out of those wet things at once."

And before she could prevent him he stooped, unfastened the laces, and pulled off her muddy boots. Eli and one of the bigger boys would bring over her box that evening when they left work.

"I'll have to lend you a pair of my slippers," he went on. "Wait a minute."

He brought in a pair for her, laughing at their size and her slender feet.

"Now you must go upstairs and get out of that wet skirt. I am afraid a dressing gown is all that I can supply you with."

He showed her the way up the winding stair to the long room overhead. He had taken his own

bed into the little room, leading out of this, and brought her that from his guest chamber. There was very little furniture, and that simple for a man's use.

He went through into the inner room and reappeared with a grey woolly gown for her.

"I'll bring you some hot water in five minutes," and he had gone downstairs again.

He had said a minute before: "You are Sara Nugent now, but I like your odd name and I shall stick to it always." Sara Nugent! She stood still, gazing about her yet seeing nothing. Sara Nugent—her name. The idea slipped again from her mind and left it as torpid and dazed as before.

At length she slipped out of her wet skirt and hung it outside over the stair rail to dry. She came back and took up the grey dressing gown. It was made of some very light and soft woollen material. About its every fold hung the odour of tobacco. She let it slip from her hold to the floor again. Where once before had she worn a garment that smelt of tobacco just like this? Then memory pierced through the torpor of her mind with a sharp cutting pain. She remembered the night on the tor, her shiver, and then the warmth of Allan Liddle's coat about her shoulders. That too had smelt vaguely of tobacco like the garment at her feet. How could she wear it with that memory quivering in her very soul? She could not. She stood rigid, looking down at it with a feeling of repulsion.

Then there came a step on the stairs. "Hot

water for you," cried her husband's voice. There was the thud of a can put down outside, and he went down again. She opened the door, poured out the water, and plunged her face into its warm and pleasant depths. There was soap that smelt delicately such as she had never used before, and a towel softer than any she ever touched. She pulled down her hair that the rain and wind had rendered so wild. Little tight rings curled about her ears. She twisted up the heavy masses and pinned them close to her head. She put on her blouse again and the soft dressing gown over all. She must wear it. She knew that. It was difficult to move about the room in the slippers that flopped up and down with every movement.

She looked about her at last. There was green and white matting on the floor, the walls were washed a soft green and the casement curtains were of the same hue. Emma had described with much detail almost every object in the cottage. But Sareel had received no very definite impression, since she had never seen anything of the type before. She liked the soft colouring and the simple furniture. She noticed that there were books here too, a pile on the window seat—pipes and books seemed everywhere. There were not many pictures; but one of a woman hung facing the bed, and she wondered idly who she could be, until she caught a resemblance to Nugent in the humorous mouth and kindly eyes.

She felt nervous at going downstairs unasked. She waited until a voice cried from below:

"Ready? Your meal is if you are." She wrapped the loose gown about her and went down.

The round table was drawn to the fire and spread for a meal. There was a fragrant smell of coffee. Nugent, who could cook as well as any woman, had made an omelette. There was a big bowl of cream, rolls and biscuits, and a large box of French chocolates.

"There's only one thing that I am absolutely sure of about a woman, and that is that she is positive to like chocolates," he laughed as he put a chair for her.

"I am not going to force you to a meatless diet like myself. I eat it because I prefer it. You must choose your own menu for the same reason," he said as he helped her to a piping hot share of the omelette.

"I'm niver much for mate," she said shyly; then as she ate: "this is brave and gude."

The coffee under a spirit lamp on a side table bubbled and simmered and filled the air with its fragrance. Sareel's companion noticed that, in spite of appreciative comments, she did not eat much.

"You will have to alter that," he told her. "You ought to have an appetite in this air."

When they had finished he lifted back the table and made her take the long chair across the hearth, pulled out its foot rest and piled cushions for her back. He brought her cup of coffee and put it on a stool at her side. He lit his pipe and took the chair opposite.

"I'll put the things away fust," she urged, with a glance at the table.

He put out a protesting hand.

"Not on your wedding day. I can't allow that. I have waited on myself for so long that I shall hardly know the place with a woman about it. You must not do much at first, so that I may grow used to the idea. Men are fearful creatures of habit, you know."

They did not talk much. The walk and the damp air had tired Sareel more than she had realised. It was very comfortable among those cushions in the long chair. The warmth of the fire made her drowsy. She dropped off to a dreamless sleep.

When he was quite sure of her unconsciousness Nugent got up and cleared the table with noiseless movements. He carried the things out to the back kitchen and put them away in his usual orderly, deft way. When he came back she was still asleep.

He sat down and watched her. She looked such a child in her sleep. The mournful droop of her full lips made her seem plaintive to his eyes. The sweeping lashes on the pallor of her cheek lay dark as night. What a beautiful, wistful young thing she was! Mysterious, too, with her unknown ancestry and her unlikeness to her past surroundings. Compassion and tenderness welled up in him as he watched her unconscious face. Could he bring the light of happiness to those hidden eyes, curves of laughter to that pathetic

mouth, and joy into her young life? It ought not to prove a task beyond him. Life should prove fuller and more exhilarating lived by her side. If only he could win her confidence and trust he might lay the foundations of other, warmer developments. He must go warily at first and be very gentle with her.

He lay back in his chair, his eyes still on her face, and thought of the strangeness that had thrown their lives so suddenly and so intimately together. He had thought that he was too old to act on impulse, too experienced to trust himself again to its rash bidding. The events of the past week had shown him the falsity of that belief. It was a trait in him at which his sister had often mocked.

The days were growing longer, but this afternoon, being sunless, the twilight fell earlier than usual. The quivering blue dusk looked in on the firelit room, hovered about the unconscious figure wrapped in the loose grey gown, and filled the room with its wondering evanescent colour and shadow. There were bowls of bulbs on the window-sill just beginning to show their flower-buds. There was a thickening of forming buds on the pear tree branches trained against the outer wall.

It was not until voices and steps were heard outside that the sleeper stirred, moved uneasily, and then sat up with sleep still hovering in her eyes. She looked about her. She had forgotten where she was. What was this long room with the firelight shining on the backs of row upon row



of books along the wall? Nugent had stolen away to intercept those arriving outside. Was it all part of a dream? She sank back again among the pillows. She must be back at the farm surely, and yet . . . and yet. . . . The door shut silently and her husband crossed the room and stood looking at her, smiling down at her questioning face.

"I must have been to sleep."

"Two solid hours of it," he said; "you looked so tired I had not the heart to waken you."

He was lighting the shaded lamp and drawing the curtains to shut out the eerie night. They had tea over the fire, a beverage such as Sareel had never before tasted, a delicately flavoured drink, China tea of which Nugent was very fond. There were cakes that he had bought at Sanstow that morning, cakes such as she had never known, with almond paste and pink icing sugar coating them. She reproached him with getting them for her. "Why not? This is not a very sumptuous wedding feast after all." She dropped her eyes to her plate. Every now and again reality was beginning to pierce the close clinging veil of phantasy that hung about her. She crumbled the cake before her with unsteady fingers and could find nothing to say to him.

"You see, when a man has lived alone as I have done he gets into womanish ways," he was saying; "he has to be his own housekeeper and caterer too. Soon you will take the reins yourself. I shall wish you to, and to direct things just as you think best. I have a good deal of writing to

do. So I shall be able to give myself up to it and to the walks that make my work possible, when I plan and think. There have been days when I forgot my food altogether, and came home to a dinnerless house with the next shop seven miles away. I learnt better after a time, but things have often been on the verge of tragedy since."

"If I can I'd like brave and well to see to it all, if I know how."

"You'll learn, trust you. Besides, Emma has told me how clever you are at making bread and cooking."

"Ay, I an't a-feared of my bread."

"But just at first I want you to take things easily, go slow, have Emma here as usual, and not overtire yourself. If not I shall send for the doctor for you, who will probably keep you in bed."

She shook her head.

"What should I do wi' nort o' work?" she asked him. "I'd be turr'ble miserable, I reckon."

"Then we must avert that at any cost, and you must be obedient for a time. After all, it isn't as if spring were here and the moor tempted one. Later on you must get out as much as possible and have all the fresh air you can."

She changed the current of his talk by a question. It was so new and unfamiliar to be taken care of, planned for and consulted like this that she shrank from it. He noticed her reluctance to discuss herself and respected it.

He chose books for her, and brought them to the fire. She lay for the rest of the evening list-

lessly turning over the pages, looking at the pictures, reading very little, her eyes wandering to the fire and then to her companion deep in his own book across the hearth. It was still unbelievable except in fleeting moments. He got up more than once, and she heard him moving across the room overhead. She was disinclined to move from her comfortable chair by the fire. He came back to his book again. When the softly striking clock on his writing table struck ten he looked at her.

"Tired, aren't you? Why not go to bed?"

She left the cushiony depths of the chair and stood up. Crossing the space between the fire and the stairway she stumbled, hesitated, and then stumbled again. Strong arms caught and lifted her like a child, bore her up the narrow stairs and into the room where a fire burnt brightly in the high old-fashioned grate. They lowered her on to a low couch beside it.

She remembered nothing more until she awoke to watch the shadows of the fire flickering to and fro over the ceiling and walls. The little bed across the room was untenanted. She heard the knocking out of a pipe against the hearth from the room below. She undressed slowly, too tired to think, too exhausted to wonder at the comfort of her bed, the feel of linen sheets next her cheeks, the downy pillow against which her weary head rested so comfortably. Sleep engulfed her again; and when half an hour later a man stole up the stairs and, pushing open the door, stood looking at her, she never moved. The long chestnut plaits

lay each side of her head along the pillow, the coarse white nightgown was no whiter than the neck and breast below its untrimmed collar. He went into the little room leading out from the opposite wall that was now to be his bedroom.

## CHAPTER XIV

The weeks went by quickly and uneventfully. Sareel began to lose something of her first languor, to take an interest in the house, busy herself about it every morning, and sit mending her husband's socks and garments when the housework and cooking were done. The matron at the workhouse had taught her neat stitchery. She found plenty of occasion for it nowadays; for clever as a man may be about the house he is not usually wont to keep linen and his clothes in good repair. When these things were rectified by her clever fingers, she began to take Emma's advice about her neglected trousseau, and she made herself new underclothes.

Nugent had given her many presents in the first few weeks of their new life together. He wrote away to London shops for them, such things as the girl-wife, used only to the cheap ready-made garments provided by the shops of a country town, thought too beautiful for words. There was a warm coat with a fur collar for wear in the cold weather that had not yet taken its departure from these bleak uplands, a little cloth hat to match, with a wing in it. The recipient had a pang here. "They are not taken from living birds," he consoled her—"made from fowl's feathers mostly, dyed and arranged like this." He had already dis-

covered her hatred—as great as his own—of any unnecessary taking of life. He gave her a blue dressing gown and cosy woollen slippers, and, what perhaps she liked and was vainest over of all, new boots and shoes, thick-soled, well-made boots for the moor and dainty slippers for indoors, with more serviceable ones as well. There were two new gowns, chosen out of an array sent down, a smoke blue woollen one simply made, and a steel grey with queer cloudy sleeves and a hanging girdle of iridescent colouring.

“Too grand fer me, I seem,” she said, rebuking his extravagance, “a sight too gude.”

He laughed and shook his head.

“Youth should have pretty things, child; besides, it pleases me to see you wear them, and you will never make me believe that in your heart of hearts you do not like them too.”

“Ay, brave and well,” she answered him simply, making no further protest.

When short serge skirts and simple white woollen and silk shirts were added to her outfit, with a few other necessities, the giver stayed his hand content. But he noticed the difference that well-made garments made in her appearance, displaying the lissom lines of her straight young figure. He saw how well she walked and moved without the clumsy heavy footgear of other days.

He plunged into his work then, often forgetting her existence in the thrill and impetus of reawakened imagination and capacity. She made no demands on him. She never interrupted his

longest fit of absorption. When her housewifely duties were done she would slip into the room unperceived and curl herself up on the window-seat with her sewing or the little grey kitten that Jamie Vicary had sent her.

Within a month of his marriage Bob Nugent realized one indisputable fact about his wife, one feminine gift which she most unmistakably possessed. She was by instinct a home-maker, she brought an atmosphere of home with her mere presence. She altered the feel of the place unconsciously, just as sunshine alters a landscape. It was hard to trace her exact influence or the secret of its working. There was nothing definite to lay hold of: it was everywhere and nowhere, indefinable, inescapable, potent. When, after one of his long tramps (he often left his work to walk alone with his thoughts and give them wings) he turned back home again and saw the cottage lights shining from afar—for when he was out Sareel never drew the curtains—he hastened his steps. It was not the firelit room and the meal set ready, his slippers in the fender and his wife awaiting his return, her fingers speeding as she knitted him new socks—it was none of these things and all of them, that made him welcome, that gave him the sensation and the savour of homecoming, without a word said, or a gesture, or laugh. She would look up at his entry, the fire or lamp shining on the sheen of her hair, and putting Jimbo the kitten from her lap would rise to some duty for their meal. She would ask him perhaps a question or

two during the meal's progress, but she was never inquisitive for detail, a fact for which Emma could never really forgive her.

After dinner, when the things were cleared away and Nugent enjoyed his first evening pipe, he would read to her while she sewed or knitted. He chose what he thought would appeal to her, selecting with some care. He was not always successful, but when he did score a triumph and she would suggest: "Could we have that you read about the Pied Piper or the tale o' the sheep dog Rab? I liked yon brave and well"—he would produce "Rab and his Friends" or a volume of Browning with a feeling of satisfaction. He read her an occasional Stevenson essay, "The Story of a Red Deer," part of "The Story of my Heart," not much fiction, for he noticed that her attention was apt to wander with a story. Nor did she ever ask for poetry, although he read her from time to time Keats and parts of Cooleridge, Wordsworth and some modern poets, Bridges, stirring verse of Newbolt, and William Watson.

He could always tell, without any need of comment, that which appealed to or did not touch her. It interested him to make experiments on her. He tried nonsense verse of Lewis Carrol. She was obviously bored here. Dickens' Christmas Stories failed just as lamentably. But "Pet Marjorie" she asked for again, and "Juggling Jerry" interested her at once. She had a great idea of the extent of her husband's library. She thought it the biggest and most comprehensive in existence. She



took great care of his books, never putting one back in its wrong place, dusting them very carefully every day. She never tidied his writing table nor touched his papers. They were sacred and belonged to those periods when with absent-minded eyes he looked at her and saw her not, when his thought travelled far, and she stole about the house in her quietest slippers, so as not to disturb him by so much as a careless footfall.

He knew that she had intuitions, that one need not definitely explain to her exactly what one wanted, a process he had always hated. He told himself daily that they were growing used to one another, that if he had turned the idea of matrimony over for many months and chosen with the utmost care he could scarcely have found anybody who fitted as easily and as quietly into his habits and ways of life as Sareel.

As the days lengthened and his own writing work lessened he began to work in the garden. He whistled as he dug, and Jimbo, lured from his mistress, played with a spadeful of earth. The spring days lured Sareel from the house too, aided by fine weather and her husband's cunning. He little guessed how once she had hungered for the freedom which was now hers for the taking, and she did not as much as stretch out her hand to it. She helped him in the garden patch with seed sowing and weeding. A faint colour was coming fitfully back to her cheeks. The outdoor life intensified it. They would work till night-fall and come in tired and hungry to the evening meal that

she had partly prepared after breakfast. The light of renewed health began to look out of her eyes. She often surprised her husband with her muscular strength. "You look such a slip of a thing to handle that heavy fork"—and then he wondered why she stiffened suddenly, and was silent for so long. She was trying to guard herself against these unexpected shafts, she was trying her hardest to shut out all memory of Allan Liddle. It was a vow she had made with herself on the threshold of the new life, and she was trying to keep it with all the loyalty of which her simple nature was capable. She did keep it, in the main; only now and again at some word or gesture the old pain would burn in her with renewed agony, the old hopeless longing sweep over her in a torrent of wretchedness and regret.

She knew how much she owed to her husband, knew it all the better and more surely because he never by so much as a word or look reminded her of any debt of gratitude due from her to him. He never asked anything of her, not the smallest service; and because of that, because she knew that he never would, she wanted to give all the more bountifully, all the more readily. When she sometimes shrank from the tenderness that underlay some laughing speech or word of his she forced herself to endure it, never to withdraw her hand from the hand that sought her own, never to show the reluctance that welled up in her at his nearness, his touch, his hand on her shoulder or against her hair. He rarely kissed her; she

thanked him with all her heart, silently over and over again, for that abstinence. But she steeled herself to be ready, not to flinch by as much as a hair's breadth. Sometimes in gardening her wedding ring slipped from her hand, it had always been a little big for her, and once he picked it up and brought it to her. "You're a nice wife to fling away your badge of office in this fashion. Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Aren't you going down on your bended knees to ask my pardon?" She was never quite sure how much of his mockery was earnest. She was not now. He slipped it on her finger again, and, stooping, kissed the hand that was not quite so rough and coarsened in these days. He put his arm lightly about her shoulder as they went into the next room together, and she tried to talk naturally. She was beginning to lose much of her dialect, to copy her husband's way of speaking. He noticed it, and in human nature's illogical manner was just a little sorry and glad at one and the same time.

At Easter an old college friend had turned up unexpectedly for the day, and Nugent had remarked how well and simply then she had played the part of hostess. His old friend was enthusiastic.

"I say, Bob, you are a fraud. If you'll believe me, Mrs. Nugent, he never as much as told me of your existence until to-day."

It was strange to be addressed by that name. She had scarcely heard it used, and only seen it

on parcels addressed to her from shops. She did not talk much, but there was no *gaucherie* in her silence, and the old friends had so much to say to one another that neither remarked it. Before he had married her Nugent had told himself that it would not have been fair to Sareel to bring her into any way of living other than the quiet simple one of his present mode of existence, that he could not have risked, for her sake, ridicule or unkind criticism. But this visit of his old chum showed him that he need have no fear. There was some touch of native dignity, some instinct that guided her as surely as any known tradition.

"Lucky being you are, Bob, and no mistake. I understand now the charms of the sequestered life and the attraction of it. I envy you, old fellow."

Bob laughed; he knew that Travers, urban to the backbone, would die of ennui after six months of his own life. But he was well enough content himself, exceeding well of late, wondering how he could have borne so long the loneliness and boredom of uncompanied days in the past. To his wife it seemed that she had always been familiar with that staccato tick-tacking of the typewriter keys, always known the homely book-lined room, and the kindly face of her husband with faint lines etched about the eyes, and threads of grey in the crisp dark hair at his temples.

Emma, who only came on occasional visits now, and called her old friend ostentatiously in her husband's presence "Mrs. Nugent," grew eloquent about the latter's good fortune. Usually she

brought Jamie, who was growing a shade less emaciated.

"Wait till you've a-got a pack of chillern. Then you'll know what married life be!" Emma shot a look at Sareel standing by the window watching with smiling eyes Jamie and Jimbo at their game outside. "Then yer troubles'll come purty fast."

She produced a parcel from under her shawl.

"Ole missus gived me this a week ago, zaid as 'twas aperns or sommut belongin' you. Maid up to farm's gwine next month, and her the third since you was there dree months ago."

Was it only three months ago? It seemed a lifetime to Sareel since she had done heavy work, listened to daily, hourly recrimination and abuse, carried pails of water and scoured dairy pans and shelves.

"Rather differn-wise now, I zim," said Emma smilingly. The master of the house was out, so she took a seat and enjoyed the hasty lunch that was offered her. Nothing would have induced Emma to eat in his presence, but Sareel, for all her present affluence, was of Emma's own class, and hence could never quite occupy the proud position of her husband.

There was a little blue linen smock that Sareel had made for Jamie, to be tried on. He was very proud of it. Emma nodded and turned him round like a teetotum to observe its effect.

"Very nice it du go, very nice and proper vitty. Well there, when you've got a cheel of yer own,

you won't never have no time to saw fer Jamie, I reckon."

Sareel did not flush as easily as in old days; she had learnt more self-control, only the faintest colour heightened in her cheeks as she pulled the smock over Jamie's head, while the proud possessor, fearful that he was going to lose it for ever, began to howl. When she had comforted the child and dispatched him tearless to his mother's side, she thought of Emma's words.

A child, her child and Robert Nugent's. The idea was a strange one to her. She put it by. If things had been different, if she had cared for her husband as she knew herself capable of caring once long ago, then a child would have meant certain happiness to her, great, quivering, unalloyed happiness. But now, her hand dropped to her side. Not now. She shut the door and went in to lay the table for tea.

As she crossed the room to put it tidy she noticed the parcel that Emma had left, something belonging to herself from the farm, she had said. She lifted one of the window seats that had a bin underneath and dropped it inside. She had no time now to undo it. Her husband would be back at five; he rarely failed of coming at his appointed hour.

She had just put the kettle over when she heard his step. He whistled as he came, a trick that he seemed to have learnt only lately. He had a knapsack over his shoulders, for he had gone to the nearest village to shop. They were often short

of necessities, and made a game of substitution, until one or another of them was compelled to make a journey for shopping; but he never allowed her to return laden as he did himself. She went out to meet him and helped to undo the knapsack from his back.

She remembered later every trivial incident of this moment, the way he stooped to her, laughing, and let her unfasten the straps, the look of the evening land and the peaceful paling sky. He had brought her a little nosegay, larch blossoms red amongst their feathery green, flowers of stitchwort, speedwell and celandine, a spray of budding maple, a sprig of elm. He told her of seeing a cabbage butterfly, the first of the season, on his way back through the valley. The pear tree against the house front was white with thick blossom, the apple trees in sheltered places away from the wind already showing traces of pink. The young thrushes, which had been such an interest to her for weeks past with their house-keeping and nursery arrangements, had flown away that day from their nest in the hawthorn hedge. Every tiny detail, although at the moment she was quite unaware of it, was being etched upon her memory without one uncertain stroke.

"Well!" he touched her cheek with his finger; "what have you been doing all day? Tell me of yourself now."

"Emma came over and she brought Jamie to-day. I really believe that he is beginning to grow

at last." And she told him the incident of trying on the blue smock.

"Poor little kid!" he laughed as they went into the house together.

"And I suppose the redoubtable Emma was just as talkative as usual?"

"I think so," and then, on some sudden unaccountable impulse, she added, looking at her husband as she spoke, "she told me what a lucky creature I am. That it seemed to her as I had got more than my share."

He returned her look, straight and searching; and then he laughed again differently, with a faint note of embarrassment, but made no comment upon her words.

She was to remember that, too, in the future. That odd low laugh, and the kindling look on his face as he let his eyes rest in a long glance on her own.



## CHAPTER XV

It was June, and the moor was looking its best, a warm June of long days and luminous nights, that were only days transmuted into fresh loveliness and softened colour.

"Next week I shall finish my work, and we will celebrate the happy day by taking a holiday. We'll start early and walk to Faithful Lady Mine. You say that you have never been there, and I shall have the triumph of showing it you."

Nugent looked over at his wife. She was sitting with a bowl in her lap shelling peas, and Jimbo was playing with a pod that he had acquired from the heap at her side.

"I never went as far that way," she answered him. "What day will you have finished?"

"Wednesday, with luck, and we'll have our tramp on Thursday or Friday, if this weather holds. We'll pack a luncheon basket, and enjoy ourselves. Have a belated honeymoon, in fact," and he stretched his arms and smiled at the pleasant prospect of release from his long task and a day on the moor with his wife.

On the appointed day Sareel was early astir, making preparations for filling the luncheon basket. She was up with the lark and had got everything ready by the time that her husband appeared. He could never emulate her early rising

—the result of long habit and an inability to sleep after the sun had risen; but then she reminded him that she went to bed hours before he did, for he had got into the way of working late at night.

It was Friday, and as she moved about the house, cutting cress sandwiches, boiling eggs hard, making coffee that was to be kept hot in a thermos flask, she thought of the old superstition that forbade Friday as an unlucky day. True daughter of her land, she never turned her mattress on a Friday, and she wished suddenly that it had happened to be any other day that had been chosen for their first excursion together. She thought of dismal prophecies of Emma's, and then laughed at her foolish fancies and put them aside. Then she stopped suddenly as a fierce longing swept over her, one of those desperate hungers that took her by the throat every now and again, for Allan Liddle, for a word, news of him, certainty. If it had been with him that she had been going to-day! For him that she had been preparing this dainty meal! Fate had been cruel to her and kind at the same time! It was all a tangle and a mystery. Then she heard Bob's step on the stairs as he went out of the house whistling, to bathe in the pool under the rocks a quarter of a mile away. She rebuked herself for her thoughts, wondering why she had not yet learnt to control this tide of hopeless, helpless longing that rose high within her, threatening to sweep all else away before it, honour, faith, vows, her plighted troth, her duty to her husband.

It tinged her day, that unexpected morning mood, it thrust itself in between the brightness of the day, it cast a shadow over the sun for her. Her husband noticed that there was something wrong, that she was more silent than her wont, that he could not conjure as usual the slow transforming smile to her lips. He made no effort to discover the secret of her silence. It was not his way to force a confidence; but he was more than a little disappointed that to-day there should be the faint shadow of unacknowledged constraint between them.

He had been thinking of late that she had been growing more at her ease with him, that he might soon gain her confidence in all completeness. He had rejoiced in her rare laugh and had grown cunning in methods of provoking it. But he had no success to-day. He had to resign himself to that indisputable fact, hoping that the beauty of the day, the "wedded white and blue" of the wide stretch of sky, the warm sun with that invigorating edge of sharpness tempering its heat, might charm away in time the depression of her spirits. He thought that it would be hard for gloom to dwell unrelieved long on such a day, and he mused again on the unspoken tragedy that had cast its shadow over the life of his girl-wife; knowing now something of the sensitiveness and depth of her apparently simple and transparent nature, he could guess at the wound caused by the blow that destiny had struck at her. There was something defenceless in her, some appeal made by her lack

of resistance, that he thought must have touched any heart, however bucolic and irresponsive; and his thoughts lingered about this other man, this faithless sweetheart of hers of whom they had only spoken together once, on that fateful winter afternoon when he had taken her away from the cruelty and hardship at the farm.

It was noon when they reached their destination, a disused mine-shaft that time and nature had reclothed and reclaimed after man's desecrating hand. It opened out toward a little stream. A tangle of brambles, whortleberry and black-thorn boughs partly roofed in one end, and here they lunched in the cool shadow of the branches. It was a beautiful summer parlour. Little black-stemmed ferns clung to the interstices of the cleft rocks, and mosses grew close. There came the song of a lark from afar, that happy pealing song of perfect rapture. They found it at last, a speck against the blue.

Nugent, exploring, found a white beam tree in flower, and he brought Sareel a spray of blossom. He showed her the white silkiness of the leaves underneath. She had never seen the flower before. He brought her other treasures. He had an interest in botany, and she began to ask him questions, a revival of spirits that cheered him immediately. She knew mare's tail and bog asphodel under other names, stitchwort as "snap-jack," sundew as "fly catcher," and campion as "cuckoo flower." He delighted in these local names, and she gave him others that she knew.

He tried to guess the flower from its country name, when he was wrong she corrected him and when he was right applauded. He told her how once long ago scarlet dye was made from lichen, and he spoke of the slow growth of those silver and gold tracteries that covered the grey stones surrounding them, how a hundred years are said to make little perceptible difference in their extent. She told him the local proverb: "Thee scratch my face and I'll pick thy pocket," and he threw back his head in laughter, saying that the place where they sat exemplified the truth of that saying.

After they had eaten their sandwiches and cakes, and Nugent had produced a packet of chocolates from his pocket and watched Sareel's small white teeth nibbling one after another contentedly, he lit his pipe and went off to sleep in the sun. She wandered along the stream, stooped down and bathed her face in the rippling waters, a loosened tress floating out on the stream. She had thrown off her hat and the sun struck warm on her head. The black depression was passing away from her mind. She felt ashamed now, humiliated and penitent. She went back after a time to the long form stretched on the grass, hat over eyes, asleep in the sun. She touched the tweed coat, which its owner had flung aside, with gentle fingers, in a sort of mute apology for her silence and sullenness of an hour ago. She would never be brave enough to find words to speak it outright to the coat's wearer. She smoothed its folds, accus-

tomed now to that odour of good tobacco which had made her wince on her wedding day four months before.

She was thinking of that day, of the swiftness and precipitation with which her marriage had been arranged and carried through. It seemed to her, looking back, that it was not really herself to whom all that had happened, that it had been another woman in her place. Now that she knew Robert Nugent, after she had lived four months with him, she was beginning to understand something of the man's true nature and the depth of his compassion for everything that lived and suffered. She was beginning to understand what had made him offer her marriage, to see how it had all come about. She was piecing the parts of the puzzle together bit by bit. He had been sorry for her. He had wanted to help, and that was the only way that suggested itself to him. He had taken it, heroically, she told herself now, self-sacrificing, regardless of the cost to him of this bold experiment, thinking only of her and her friendlessness. She was just grasping the extent of his service to her. It bewildered her, but it was not incredible, after these four months of his unconscious and indirect opening of her eyes. She had not guessed the sort of man he was. She had not, until he had put it in her hands without even realising that he did so, possessed any key by which she might understand. She was assimilating rapidly, with her capacity for receiving new ideas, impressions, sensations, this new

knowledge that had come to her by slow degrees.

She was plaiting together mechanically dried grasses which she had plucked from the bank beside her, her husband's coat over her knees, her eyes bent upon her trival task. Suddenly she raised them, impelled by other eyes watching her. She saw that the sleeper had awakened, and she followed his eyes to the coat across her knees. He smiled at her without speaking, as though he liked to see it there, and then he shut his eyes again as though he did not wish to speak. She stooped her head suddenly, she was blinded by a rush of tears, and she kissed the coat sleeve as though asking a wordless pardon, unconscious that the eyes of the man opposite had opened again and were watching her with incredulity. Then a slow red spread over his sun-tanned skin. He got up and strolled down stream. Sareel put her things together, buried the scraps of paper under a stone as she had seen her husband do, strapped the basket, tipped out the last drop of coffee from the flask, and waited for him.

They had a glorious tramp back, with the sky turning amber and the clouds a glory of molten gold on either hand. The tors in the soft light rose about their way, dominating, friendly presences, the rocks glowed like jewels, and each track over the moor shimmered like a celestial pathway leading to the city of heart's desire. The constraint of the morning had vanished. They did

not talk much, but both knew the barriers were down between them for the moment.

Nugent stole a look at the girl's face.

"Tired, little 'un?" It was the name he most often called her by nowadays.

She shook her head, the evening light giving her face a wistful tenderness.

"Not a bit. I could walk as far again."

"And so could I. But all the same it will be nice to get in under our own roof, eh?"

After their evening meal, when she had taken it away and come back to him sitting smoking in the dusk, she had a sudden courage. She told herself that she would not have found it had the lamp been lit. She went over and knelt down by his chair.

"Will you forgive me for being so—so crabby-like and glum this morning?" Her voice faltered over the words.

For a moment he did not answer her, and she was afraid that he was vexed with her, and wished she had not spoken. Then he put out his hand and touched her hair with gentle fingers.

"Don't kneel to me, child." He helped her to her feet. With his hand still on her shoulder, he put down his pipe and turned her face to his. "Ay, I'd forgive you a deal more than a glum mood. Did you not guess that without asking me? You aren't afraid of me now, eh, little 'un? You've lost the first timidity?"

She fingered a button on his coat. That hand



on her shoulder, lightly authoritative yet amazingly gentle, compelled the truth.

"Not now, first along I was a-feared. It did seem as if you didn't sort of know me proper fashion, as if you might fancy me differnwise to what I be." The dialect was coming back under the stress of her emotion.

He laughed, a little low laugh of pleasure.

"I don't think that I did know you properly. I told you that we were sure to teach one another. I like learning my lesson. I like my gentle little teacher. She is very patient with my masculine stupidity."

The tenderness in his voice was like a caress. She forced herself not to shrink from it. She lifted her face to his as he put his hand under her chin and drew her to him. He stooped and kissed her brow. She let him kiss her a second time before she broke away.

She went upstairs. He sat on in the dusk smoking. A white moth flitted in at the window and out again. The garden scents were very sweet upon the quiet air. He heard the light movements over-head. He made no attempt to light the lamp, but sat on in the twilight with his thoughts.

She was asleep when he went upstairs. He lighted a candle and went over to look at her, shading the light with his hand from her eyes. She had one hand under her cheek, the heavy plaits hung over the pillow. The long day in the

open air had sent her early to sleep. He went downstairs and sat at his writing table.

He wrote, and after some corrections read what he had written:

“Hold thy face close, ah! closer. Now it slips  
Here, in the darkness, from mine eager lips.  
Surrender me thine eyes, turn not away  
Those shy, unclouded eyes of limpid grey,  
Where, only for a moment, sunshine flashes  
Under the slow uplifted veil of lashes.  
Thy head against my breast lies quiet now.  
The heavy hair in masses from thy brow  
Has fallen back. At last, close as a child,  
I hold secure my captive wood-bird wild.”

They were to mock him later, those ardent words. To-night he lingered over them. Perhaps he might venture to show them to her some day. His lips parted in a smile at the idea. What would she think? Would they scare her again? He would wait. He was content to wait, well enough content.

## CHAPTER XVI.

There was a gorgeous early autumn that year. September flamed over the moor with ardent splendour of mellow noons and morning mists; but October came in damp and misty, and storms of rain and wind beat against the cottage at Uphill and howled down the chimneys, sending showers of sparks over the hearth, frightening Jimbo horribly. He leaped into his mistress's lap for consolation, eyeing the hearth suspiciously and arching his grey back at it at intervals for the rest of the evening. It was too rough to stand on the moor, Sareel would return home soaked and exhausted by the buffetting wind and lashing rain.

One morning, when their stores had given out and somebody must make a pilgrimage to secure more, Nugent started forth. The wind caught the door and slammed it in the face of his wife standing to watch him depart. She went to the window and saw him breasting the hill, his head lowered against the tearing wind, his hat pulled down over his eyes, the collar of his sou'-wester turned up. She had not wanted him to go on such a day, for she knew that the five and a half miles each way would send him home drenched to the skin; but he had insisted, and then she gave in as always to his firmer will.

There were many things to be done in the house. She was turning out cupboards and putting fresh paper on shelves, and in her task she came upon the window seat receptacle and the parcel that Emma had brought her months before. She had completely forgotten it, and she put it on one side, meaning to undo it when her work was finished. Half an hour later she sat down by the fire that was sulky and burning smokily. The parcel lay unopened in her lap. She played with Jimbo before unwrapping it, trailing the piece of string across the rug, and watching his gambols as he leaped to and fro.

At last she unrolled the paper and took out the contents. They were just what she had expected: two old coarse aprons, worn and frayed with constant wear and washing. She put them aside and sat thinking of those other days. They were beginning to seem as unreal as some fantastic dream. Jimbo leaped on to the stool by her side and pushed the aprons off on to the floor. They lay unrolled on the rug, something white showing among their brown folds.

Sareel stooped to investigate.

In the middle of the apron lay several envelopes, one had been slit through with a knife, others were unopened. She picked them up with no particular interest. They probably belonged to the new maid at the farm and had been put inside in error. She looked down at them and read their direction mechanically: "Miss S. Hill, Ridge Farm, Mr. Ashplant." They were for her, then.

Even then, for the moment, she did not realise their real import. She tore one open and took out two sheets of closely written paper. She read a line or two. The letter began without any formal opening.

"Why have you never answered one of my letters? I have looked for a word from you day after day. What has happened? Are you ill? Have I offended you in any way? What is the meaning of this strange and unbroken silence of yours? It puzzles me. You puzzle me. I cannot understand your present attitude. You have only to make it clear and I promise you that I will respect it whatever it may be. It isn't quite fair, do you think, to treat me like this? You have hurt me horribly and I hate to believe that you would do this willingly. What is it? What has made you alter in this unexpected sort of way? You ought to know that I was sincere. Has someone been poisoning your mind against me? I don't know what to think. I am completely baffled. But if, after this, I don't hear from you I shall have only one conclusion to draw, and I must draw it, that you do not wish to have anything more to do with me, that for some inexplicable reason, trust has been destroyed between us, and I naturally shall make no more efforts to reach you. It rests with you whether or not that happens. It all depends on your wishes. I have nothing more to say.—A. L."

The sheet dropped from her hands as she tore

open another envelope with shaking fingers. This letter was written in a different vein.

"Of course I know that there must be some cause for your silence. Don't be afraid to write. I remember your talking about that to me. You know that I want to hear. I tell myself daily that there may be a hundred excellent reasons why I have not yet had a letter from you, but for the life of me, Sareel, I cannot think of one myself. Perhaps I ought to have more patience, but it has never been a virtue of mine and I am afraid that it never will be. I never could wait as a child. It set me all on edge, and it does now, this suspense of wondering what has happened to you, imagining all manner of disasters and calamity. In saner moments I call myself a fool, and think that things of that sort don't happen in our commonplace world, that you are safe and well, and it is only some unhappy fate that I have not yet had one single word from you. It is eight weeks now since I left the farm, it might be eight years for the interminable length of time. I can't settle to things. I've taken up music again to try and calm myself, to teach myself patience. My friends say that I am growing unsociable; perhaps I am, and if so, it is your fault. Won't you send me word that you are sorry? I cannot think that you are fickle, changeable, capricious. These accusations, even in my present mood, do not seem to fit you, and as I write them I laugh at their absurdity in connection with yourself. Don't my letters please you? I can promise you that I have never been

so critical as of them. I seem to see all things only in relation to you. You colour all my thoughts and actions and get into my dreams. I have spoken of you to my sister. She was interested in you and wants to know you personally; but I cannot arrange it if I do not know what is happening to you. Is it that you have repented of giving me your confidence? You should not. I have not betrayed it, nor ever could. I feel sure that you must in your heart of hearts come to believe that. It is as true as anything can be, and unalterable. You seem to have vanished like a dream on waking. I find myself wondering if you are actual fact, or only a figment of my own imagination. Sometimes I declare to you that I am within an ace of crediting the latter. Convince me of your reality, as only you can do, as I tell myself you will certainly do before long. Write to me, if only the briefest word.—A. L.”

She read each through carefully several times. At first the shock was too great to be credible. Then the blood danced in her veins. He had never forgotten her, never. The old woman at the farm had intercepted each of these letters and had sent them now to her with malicious intent. There was no room yet in her mind for hatred or bitterness, only for joy, a flood of dizzy bewildering joy that ousted everything else. The room swayed to and fro before her eyes. Her heart overflowed in a great tide of happiness and reawakened faith.

For the first few minutes she could grasp no other fact than that her brain was in swirling confusion. Then one fact emerged and steadied her instantly. She must go to him. Letters would not suffice. She must go to him and at once.

She got up trying to plan things rapidly. She must go before Bob came back. It would be easier so. She must not delay. She took up the letters again. They were headed St. Cyprian's, Cambridge. They had been written months before; but she must take the risk of his not being there. Somebody would surely tell her his whereabouts if he had gone. She had no other clue. She knew nothing about trains or routes. She had only travelled twice in all her life. She went across the room to where a Bradshaw lay. She had seen her husband look up trains in it for his friend at Easter but the figures and lists of stations danced before her eyes unmeaningly. She must walk to the station and find out.

She went up quickly and changed her morning frock for a short tweed skirt and a white silk shirt. It was raining still, the heavy drops lashed against the window pane and trickled down in streams. She put on thick boots and tied her hat on with a silk scarf against the wind. She donned a raincoat, her husband's latest gift. She must have money. In a purse upstairs was her own little store that she had saved at the farm, savings which Bob would never let her use. There were about five pounds in all. She slipped the purse in her coat pocket. She would need some things



too. She thrust slippers and a blouse into a leather satchel and ran downstairs two steps at a time.

She must leave behind some word of explanation. She went over to the heaped writing-table and wrote a few words on one of the pads her husband constantly used.

"I am going away. I have to go. Don't worry about me. I have got to go.—S."

She did not stop to re-read what she had written. She tore off the sheet and folded it in three and put it under a paper-weight where he could not fail to find it. She was not really thinking of him. Her mind had no room for any other thought than the fact that it was all a mistake, that Allan had written to her all the time and she was going to him. That sang in her brain over and over like a happy refrain.

She threw logs on the fire and put over the guard for safety. She poured out a saucer of milk for Jimbo and set it on the floor. Then she went out without one look about her, only anxious to get away before there was any chance of her husband's return. He would be walking in the opposite direction to the station. There was no fear of her meeting him once she was over the hill.

The fierce wind caught her full in the face as she reached the summit, and took her breath away, but she battled along against it steadily,

only turning back now and again to draw a deep breath. In spite of her thick boots and stout coat the rain found its way through. Nothing could resist it on such a day as this.

She was drenched when she got to the station. There was no train for an hour and a half, so she went into the little shed that served for a waiting room and wrung the rain from her skirt. She was not conscious of cold. The blood in her veins was too quick for any sensation of chill. She was going to Exeter and then would find out about trains from there, a friendly porter, who also acted as booking clerk, advising that course, his curious eyes on the drenched little figure who asked him so diffidently. But the fight with the wind had whipped a vivid colour into the pale cheeks, and damp hair clung in rings under the brim of her close-fitting hat.

She had some hot coffee at Exeter. It warmed her well, for she was now cold and stiff with sitting in her damp clothes. It was six o'clock by this time. The guard told her that she would not reach London until past ten. She bought some chocolate, although she had no sensation of hunger nor of fatigue. The long tedious journey, with a dull middle-aged woman who asked her constant questions, would have been insupportable if she had not, every half hour or so, pulled from her pocket a letter to read and re-read over and over again. The light was poor. "You'll ruin your eyesight trying to read by this light," said her companion, watching her closely. She noticed

the wedding ring on Sareel's finger, it fitted better now, and its owner had not even thought of removing it from her hand. Her thick deerskin gloves had been soaked with rain on her walk to the station. They lay on the seat beside her. "Married I see, not very old to be a wife, I reckon," remarked the woman opposite, but there was no reply from the girl bent over her letter, her mind far away, her eyes fixed on the sheet in her hand. The other, rebuffed at last, gave up all attempts to be friendly and settled off to sleep in the opposite corner.

Sareel did not notice her. The world had suddenly contracted for her and she was not conscious of anything about her for the moment. She was happy, deliriously happy, like a drowning man who reaches shore safely after a long and almost hopeless struggle with tempestuous waters. She had reached haven or very nearly, and she had no room for any other thought than that stupendous, dizzy one. In a few hours they would be together, and all would be at an end, all this long perplexing silence and mystery. A thought of Mrs. Ashplant and her action of enmity and malice pierced momentarily, but even as it rose it was borne away again on a tide of joy too strong for anything else to live against it. At another moment she thought of her husband, and as if in answer to that pricking uneasiness that the memory of him brought her, words of his, spoken when he had asked her to marry him, came back to her memory as if in response to her need.

"I should not exact much of you. I should want you to have all the liberty you wished . . . always. It is, in my idea, the only way of life for self-respecting men and women."

She had taken her liberty now, and come away in answer to the imperative call of her own heart. She had scarcely thought of him until this moment, hardly formulated to herself his aspect of this sudden flight. She would tell Allan everything and abide by what he wished and thought best; even if he thought it right that she should return to her husband, she would make no protest if the latter would have her back. She had never pretended to make any stand against the urgent pressure of the will of another. She would certainly not do so now. She would be content to follow his will in any case, when once they had been together, and all that had happened to keep them apart was satisfactorily and fully explained between them. Allan Liddle should decide her destiny, and she would submit herself willingly to that decision, be it what it might.

Her mind grew passive again. She put the thought of Bob away from her. There was no room for him in her present mood. She was never able to think of more than one thing at a time. The woman opposite snored loudly and her mouth dropped open, but her companion never shut her eyes. They stared straight in front of her, smiling at the vision that they saw, the vision of reunion after separation, of faith after doubt, security after misunderstanding.

She told the guard where she wanted to go.

"Have to get to Liverpool Street, right across, for the Great Eastern," he said. "Taxi's the quickest way to manage it, if you don't mind the expense."

She told him that she did not. What was expense to her now?

"Can't tell you what time the Cambridge train leaves. We are twenty minutes over-due already."

He consulted his watch and suggested that she should wait in London the night; he could direct her to respectable lodgings. She shook her head emphatically, saying that she wanted to go straight through.

"Doubt but that you'll miss the Cambridge train and have to wait for the mail."

She said that she would risk that.

The woman in the corner woke up then and said: "You are in a great hurry, my dear. A case of illness is it?"

"No, not illness," she answered, and volunteered no further statement.

She took a taxi from Waterloo. There were endless delays, it seemed to her; a van had broken down across the street and they had to go round. She gave the driver four shillings and hurried into the station. She had missed the train by five minutes. She sat in the waiting-room, where people huddled up on chairs and benches slept soundly all around her. She did not try to sleep. She consulted every few minutes the little wrist watch that Bob had given her three months before. She

went out long before the train was due and walked up and down the dreary grey station impatiently. The gates of the platform were not yet open. The figures of porters and passengers looked spectral and unreal, for the station was full of fog that obscured the lights and gave the place a ghostly look.

At last the iron gates moved, and she showed her ticket and was let through. There was plenty of time, but she ran down toward the train, afraid that, although apparently empty, it might start before she had time to get in. She stumbled head foremost into an empty compartment. There were not many travellers, mostly men and women with bulky bundles and dirty faces, two of whom got into her compartment and fell asleep almost immediately. The train moved out of the station through the squalid streets of East London. Sareel shut her eyes, vainly trying to imagine the journey over, and herself just reaching its end. Her head ached in a dull throbbing fashion at intervals, and yet she was scarcely conscious of the pain. When they woke up her travelling companions began to eat out of paper bags. They offered her one, and when she refused took no more notice of her.

At last Cambridge was reached. She stepped out on to the long platform that seemed to stretch away interminably into the misty grey distance. She went up to a porter and asked him if he could direct her to a lodging. She knew that it would be some hours before she could see Allan. She

wanted to wash and tidy her hair. She had forgotten it was Sunday. The man called to a mate, who knew a respectable widow who had rooms to let.

"I'll be going that way in a minute and you could come along too."

She waited, and at last followed him out into the raw morning air, through the muddy unlovely streets to a little one with ugly houses each exactly like its neighbour. He knocked at one door.

"Sure to be up a'ready, her son's on the line," he commented, and after an interval there came the sound of feet along the passage, and a woman, her front hair screwed in iron curling pins, opened the door.

The porter's friend explained, and then left them.

Sareel stepped inside the narrow passage. The respectable widow eyed her keenly, respectability had rendered her suspicious. She referred constantly to "Mr. Brown," who was evidently the man who had brought her here, and it was apparently solely because of that fact that she consented to accept this young stranger as a lodger. She opened the door of the front room, a tiny apartment with a dreary look, and asked for a sum in advance as a guarantee of good faith. Sareel gave her fifteen shillings, and wondered if it were too small a sum; as a matter of fact the widow had not expected more than five. Later she brought Sareel a cup of tea and some bread

and butter. Sareel forced herself to eat and then followed her landlady upstairs to the front bedroom.

"'Bed was slep' in larst week,'" said the latter, indicating it.

Sareel asked for hot water, and took off her blouse and skirt. The wash freshened her. She took her brush and comb from her satchel and pulled down her hair. She rearranged it, and put on a clean blouse, took off her shoes for slippers, and sat down on a rickety chair. Her limbs ached, and still at times that curious thudding pain shot through her head.

A clock somewhere outside chimed the hour, seven. She went downstairs to the front parlour. In the grate, surrounded by lurid flowery tiles, a tiny fire was burning, and the table laid for a meal. Once or twice the widow came in and out again, casting searching glances at the little figure in the low chair by the fire, elbows on knees, chin cupped in her hands, looking into the fire.

Two hours later she asked as to the whereabouts of St. Cyprian's. The widow knew it well, seeing that her brother-in-law was in the kitchen there. She was anxious to discover what business her young lodger had with St. Cyprian's, but was unsuccessful. At ten Sareel set forth in the direction indicated. The squalid part of the town merged into wide streets with dignified grey buildings on either side. Church bells were clamorous, groups of people in Sunday clothes passed along continuously. Sareel lost her way or forgot Mrs.



Green's lengthy directions. She found herself facing a great hoary pile with gabled windows along one side, and a towering gateway giving entry. She asked a passer-by if this were St. Cyprian's. "No, second turning on the right, and then it faces you."

She was growing a little frightened by this time. She took the second turning, and then was puzzled again, for two buildings faced her, both equally ancient-looking and college-like. She asked again. The second was St. Cyprian's. She hesitated. Young men in caps and gowns hurried by her, countless young men. She kept close against the wall. The man in front turned in at St. Cyprian's and she followed. He went through the quadrangle. There were countless bicycles in the entry and leaning against the wall. An elderly man came out of the porter's lodge and asked her what she wanted; he was not unkindly.

"Is Mr. Liddle here?" she asked, suddenly feeling unafraid.

He called to someone behind him.

"Mr. Liddle's away this week-end, isn't he, Walter?"

Walter answered that he was.

"Coming back to-morrow, ain't he?" called the elderly man over his shoulder to the unseen Walter inside.

"Monday or Tuesday, didn't say which," answered the man from within.

Sareel went out again into the narrow street.

It was almost a relief not to find him there, and at the same time a keen disappointment. Young men passed her by constantly. She had never seen so many in all her life before. She told herself that she would go back and write to him. She went back slowly, stopping every now and again. The last red leaves from the grey tower across the way were blown off one by one, and trodden into the mud of the street. They fluttered down upon the hurrying passers by, and one fell on Sareel's shoulder. She thought of the country superstition that it was lucky to catch a leaf, and she crumpled it in her hand. "Monday or Tuesday," the man had said. She repeated the words over and over mechanically as she went.

There was a pervading smell of dinner as she entered the little passage, a smell that nauseated her. She went in by the fire and threw herself into the low chair beside it. When Mrs. Green came in with her tray she saw that she had fallen asleep, and went out again. "Poor young thing, up all night, no wonder she's dropped off. I'll keep a plate of our dinner hot for her."

Sareel slept until four o'clock, the dreamless sleep of exhaustion. She refused the plate of dinner kept hot, to her landlady's extreme disapproval. After tea she asked for writing materials, and sat down to write to Allan. She found it difficult, and tore up sheet after sheet. At last she found it impossible to explain at any length.

"I never got one of your letters until this yesterday. I came away at once here. I went to the college this morning. They told me you were away until Monday or Tuesday. I shall wait here until you are able to come to me.—S."

Mrs. Green obliged with a stamp and said that her son would be passing by the Post Office later and would drop the letter in to save Sareel going out in the rain. It was raining heavily now, the slow unceasing rain that settles in for the night. Sareel was very dissatisfied with the letter, it was bald and curt, and not in the least what she had wanted to write; but the odd beating pain at the back of her head forbade her tearing it up and beginning another. She had to let it go with obvious reluctance.

It was not until mid-day on Tuesday that Allan Liddle got it. He had been spending the weekend a few miles off with friends. The porter handed him a pile of letters as he passed through the entrance. He took them, without looking them through, and flung them all aside when he got to his rooms. He would read them later. He had asked three men to lunch with him. It was nearly four o'clock before they left; even then he was disinclined to look through his letters. He sat down at the piano and played for half an hour; then he grew restless and got up, pacing the room. The letters caught his eye, he took them up and flung himself into the deep chair by the fire. It was too dark to see to read there. He lit the

candle in a tall brass sconce overhead, and began to look them through. There were the usual uninteresting bills and catalogues, notices of forthcoming concerts, theatrical companies, lectures, sales of wines and cigars. He tossed them aside one after the other, until he came to Sareel's letter.

The unformed handwriting was strange to him. He tore open the envelope casually and flung it on the fire, where it flamed suddenly. Even then he did not at once begin to read the letter, but idly watched the burning envelope and thought of some music he had heard the night before, a haunting thing of Debussy's, how did it go? He hummed the air to himself until he got it right at last. The letter slipped unread to the rug at his feet; he picked it up and read it through. Then he sprang to his feet, his face aflame, his eyes flashing. There was news of Sareel at last—veritably a letter from herself and she was here—in Cambridge and waiting his coming to her.

The light died from his face suddenly, like a flame blown out unexpectedly. Four months ago this news would have meant happiness to him, would have appeased his eager longing to get once more into touch with her, would have changed his whole outlook. But now! He buried his face in his hands, shuddering in every nerve. Now! The inevitable had happened, as it always did with him after a rebuff, a long silence, or any misunderstanding. A man across the quad was

strumming a music hall song. Two friends were conversing out of their windows on different floors. Somebody banged a door violently overhead and came tumbling down stairs, three steps at a time, making a thunderous noise. Allan went on shuddering, with his arms outstretched across his table, his head buried in them, while the various unlovely sounds beat against his sensitive ears with maddening, almost unbearable persistence. It seemed to him that if only the men would be quiet he might try and think; now thoughts ran round and round meaninglessly in his brain without coherence or connection.

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## CHAPTER XVII.

It was more than a year since Allan Liddle had written to Sareel without response. His first mood of suspense and anxiety, and, it must be confessed, wounded self-esteem, had continued for some three months or so, to be succeeded by a period of almost complete indifference and emotional torpor. Such were not rare to his responsive, susceptible nature. Keenly impressionable and impatient as he was, he could brook neither delay nor check. When things went wrong, they moulded him to something rigidly different from his earlier ardour. This had happened to him months before. He had put all thought of Sareel resolutely from his mind. He had flung himself impetuously into the study of music. He had filled his life with new interests and occupations. The emotion that his brief spell of companionship with the girl at Ridge Farm had aroused in him came to appear—on those few occasions when the memory of it and of her thrust itself insistently upon his consciousness, refusing to be strangled—as unreal, fantastic, and altogether improbable. He told himself that he had idealised Sareel; that she must have been really very different from the fancy portrait that he had made of her. In sober fact she was doubtless far more bucolic than he had realised, more

commonplace and prosaic, more in truth like the girls of her class and type than in his first enthusiasm he would have allowed.

He repented of having confided, even in the tentative fashion which was all he had attempted, in his sister. But she never referred to the confession again, an abstinence for which he blessed her. He knew that Lois understood him better than anybody else in all this world. Yet just lately, from some unacknowledged impulse, he had rather avoided her society. She never asked uncomfortable questions, so his avoidance went unremarked; but a look in her eyes when they met, a rare event of late, told her brother that she wondered a little why they saw so little of one another these days.

He thought of Lois immediately after he had read Sareel's brief note. He was uncertain, embarrassed, unhappy. He tramped up and down his room for some minutes, revolving what was best to do. He wished to heaven now that his letters had remained buried in oblivion permanently. Then his mood changed suddenly. He was ashamed of himself. She had come at once, all this long journey on purpose to see him. He must of course go to her at once; although heaven knew what he could find to say to her when he got there. He hated brutal truths, and if he told her, this must prove such. He shrank from inflicting pain, shrank from the inflicting rather than the pain, perhaps. He hesitated, turning the note over and over in his hands with quick

nervous gestures. If only he could send Lois to her! He never doubted but that his sister would go. But he dared not take that course yet. It would be too feeble and unfair. What a hopeless tangle it all was! Not all of it could be laid at his own door, he told himself with a tinge of self pity; some of it was the work of fate, destiny, unhappy chance, call it what one would.

He must go, but he remained irresolute. He must go and tell her that he no longer cared. That was what it came to in plain language. He would do anything he could for her. As soon as he had seen her he would go or send to Lois, and she would evolve something in solution. If only he could have written to her, how much easier explanation would have been! He opened the door quickly, before his mood changed, and plunged down the stairs, running into a friend on the way and taking no notice of his annoyance, or the words shouted after him: "Liddle! I say. I want a word with you." He was gone across the quadrangle through the archway and out into the narrow street, passing several more friends on the way, going on, with his head down, covering the ground quickly with his long swinging strides.

Sareel had not left the house that day for fear of missing him. She sat over the fire listening to every step, her heart beating wildly when one stopped outside and the bell tinkled in the passage, holding her breath before Mrs. Green answered it with her slow unhurrying steps. When the voice proved a strange one her heart fell into



black unutterable depths, only to leap up again at the next ring, the next voice, and then to sink anew. She shivered as she crouched over the fire, and the odd pain at the back of her head came and went momentarily. She looked about her. It seemed that she had known for years this dreary little room with its ugly wallpaper, its dried grasses and plush photograph frames, and the big gramophone with its brass horn which stood on a side table. Mrs. Green had offered to start it for her several times, suggesting that it might cheer her up a bit, but she had managed just in time to prevent her. She thought that it was the one thing she could not bear just now, and at the mere idea that sharp, piercing pain came and went like a flash through her head.

How could she bear life if he did not come to-day? She had hardly slept all night. She shuddered as she imagined another like the last. She wanted him so. Surely if he knew, he would come, and soon. She had not been able to put down into words her longing. She hoped he would have known without her word. Perhaps he had not yet returned. The man at the porter's lodge had said Monday or Tuesday. Which day was it now? She could not remember. A sort of panic seized hold of her. Was she going mad? Her brain seemed to whirl round and round in eddying circles of pain, each more intense and maddening than the last. Where was she? Where was this room, in whose house? She took her head in both hands, trying to force herself away from

these terrifying questions, back into the groove of sanity again. Then all of a sudden the sense of panic slipped away from her, leaving her brain clear, her mind quite untroubled again, remembering everything.

Then feet outside stopped, and the tinkling bell sounded in the passage. She told herself that this time she would not listen and hope. She closed her ears with her fingers to that disappointing voice at the door. She sat with her back to the window and shut her eyes; so that she did not notice the door open, or see the figure standing irresolutely on the threshold watching her.

Allan shut the door quietly and crossed the room. He put his hand lightly on her shoulder, wondering if she were asleep. She started and opened her eyes that filled with a rapture of almost incredulous joy that frightened him. She held out both her hands to him, unable to find a word at first. He took them in his and stood looking down at her, he too in silence, with no word to say to her. It seemed an eternity, that long moment in which neither spoke. The coals in the grate crackled, and one dropped from the bar to the hearth with a sharp noise.

Sareel took away her hands from his and said:

"I wondered if you would be back to-day . . . the man at the college was not certain if you would."

The look of radiant joy was fading from her face swiftly. She sat down on the rickety sofa with its many cushions covered with gaudy silk

patchwork. He took the chair opposite, cursing the tongue-tied fate that held him speechless. But he was telling her surely, without any need of words, the bitter truth from which he shrank, telling her without speech that which he found it impossible to utter. Very quickly, at first a mere glimmer, the more definite perception of the truth took hold of her mind. He had not been with her five minutes yet; and it seemed to her that she had known for years the certain truth that he had changed.

She shivered. He got up then and shovelled some coal upon the dying fire. The noise hurt her abominably, so that she could have cried out with the agony of it.

"I only got back to-day. I didn't open your letter until half-an-hour ago, or of course I should have been to see you before. I put it aside, not knowing that it was from you. I never guessed. You must have wondered why I was so long in coming."

She wished he would not talk nothings like that, as though she had been a stranger. Then she told herself that of course she was one to him now. Allan meanwhile was asking himself how he might explain, how tell her? He did not know that he had already done so. She could not tell him, much as she longed for him to stop talking and go away without any more unnecessary words, any further attempt at explanation. She knew all the truth now, every bit. She could scarcely endure the pain of his presence. It was

unendurable agony, and again her mind swirled in a seething tide of panic and distress. It died down again, as it had done an hour before, leaving her quite calm. The knowledge of the truth, that had at first scorched her like a live coal, made her numb now. She felt nothing. He was talking still, but she found it hard to hear the words he said.

"How strange that you should never have got my letters, how abominable. Yet how did they come into your hands now?"

"Mrs. Ashplant sent them to me." (He noticed for the first time that her speech was different.)

"She must have kept them back on purpose. She came to hate me after a bit, I saw it in her face."

She seemed to be making remarks to some stranger to whom she was quite indifferent, someone in whom she had no interest and never had had.

"How rotten! What a beastly thing to do! One can scarcely credit one human being acting so to another." He got up and paced the narrow track between the table with the gramophone and the American organ by the opposite wall. "I couldn't imagine the reason of your silence. I never dreamed of such a thing as this happening. How should I? How should anyone?"

A minute before his speech had been agony to her, now she was indifferent, unaffected. She tried to listen to what he said; but she could not keep her attention fixed upon his words, it

wandered every instant, in spite of her effort to keep it concentrated.

After a few minutes, when she did not reply to a question, he turned and looked at her. Her face had changed since he came. It had a strange leaden hue, and the lips were pinched and drawn unnaturally. Her aspect alarmed him. He came over to her.

"Why, you are ill," he said abruptly. "You look very ill. What is it?"

Then his gaze fell on her hands, not coarse and work-stained now, but clasped together tightly to try and stop their trembling. He noticed the wedding ring on her left hand. He stooped and touched it with his finger.

"Married! You married!"

She looked up at him with an odd, almost a fanatical, light in her eyes.

"I was married last March," she said, with a jerky interval between each word, an interval in which her breath came short and rapidly, audible in the sudden silence that had fallen on the noisy street outside.

"Where is your husband? You left him to come here—to see me?"

He was growing more puzzled and uneasy every moment. Then a great wave of compassion swept over him. He sat on the couch by her side and laid his hand on her shaking ones. Very gently she detached them from his hold. She tried to speak twice and failed; but the third effort suc-

ceeded, and she said, in a curiously hollow flat tone:

"Yes. . . . I left him to come here. . . . I didn't tell him. . . . I was afraid to wait . . . you see. I can't remember how it was . . . but I know that I couldn't stop to tell him. I remember that quite well. . . . When I found the letters I never thought of anything else but coming away here . . . and I came . . . at once."

"Don't try and talk," he said, gently; "I can see it hurts you. Lie back here."

He forced her against the pile of ugly cushions and she lay there a moment motionless. Then she sat up and was seized with a fit of strangled coughing that exhausted her. She fell back white and breathless. After an interval she began to talk again in that same toneless, impersonal voice:

"You see, I didn't wait to tell him . . . in case —." She repeated the words several times.

He watched her helplessly, frightened now more thoroughly every instant, turning over desperately in his mind what was the best and quickest way in which to summon help. He got up, and crossing the room tugged at the bell by the fireplace. Its clanging echoes resounded in the little passage, and after a few minutes that seemed an hour to the man who waited, there came the sound of slowly moving feet. The door opened and the protesting face of the landlady appeared. He went to her and spoke in an undertone. She pointed overhead. Then he came back to the girl, crouching again over the bright fire.

A heavy footstep moved to and fro overhead. Allan's eyes never left the bending figure with the shaking hands outstretched to the blaze.

Mrs. Green appeared again.

"I've a put a good fire and two 'ot bottles in the bed. I'll wait while you go round, best go yourself."

"You'll stay with her?" and he was gone. The first doctor was out. He tried a second, and brought him back in a quarter of an hour. Sareel had never moved. Allan stood looking out of the window at the dreary houses opposite while the doctor made his inspection. He heard his low incisive questions, repeated in many cases twice and even thrice, and then the slow, intermittent replies.

"We must get her upstairs. You say there's a fire?" the doctor said over his shoulder.

Allan lifted her then and carried her upstairs. The doctor had gone to telephone for a nurse and was back before Mrs. Green had got her into bed. The nurse appeared shortly. Allan went out to telephone Lois.

Half an hour later Lois came to his rooms. His wretched eyes told her of something seriously wrong. Lois Liddle was tall and lithe, with not a spare ounce of flesh on her bones, and the poise of one who is athletic. Just as there was something feminine about her brother, so about her there was a hint of boyishness, a frankness that was indisputable, and a hatred of superfluities.

"You remember my speaking to you about that

girl at the farm on the moor?" He was taking up and putting down mechanically a little bronze Buddha that acted as a paper weight.

"Yes. I remember."

"I can't go into it all now. . . . But she's here in Cambridge. She came yesterday and is very ill. I went to see her this afternoon and found her so. I got a doctor, and there's a nurse already. But I find that she's married now." The long fingers were quiet for a moment. "Apparently she's come away here without a word to her husband. What had better be done? I thought that you would be sure to know. She's very ill."

"Poor child! Do you know her husband?"

He shook his head.

"We must send to him, Nallie"—it was her old nursery name for him. She knew by his face how unhappy he was, and she was used to his escapades. Ever since nursery days she had been accustomed to extricate him from their results. She was thinking rapidly now, in her swift decisive fashion. "We must send to the husband at once, telegraph. If it doesn't get to him this evening, it will first thing in the morning."

"I don't even know his name," he protested miserably, his eyes on his sister's face.

"We must find out. I'll go there and have a word with the nurse. Would you rather I went alone?"

"No. I'll come too."

They went out together. It was drizzling, and the street lamps were lit, the wet streets showing



long reflections and ladders of wavering light. They tramped along without a word. The doctor had just left when they got there. The nurse was still too busy to see anyone. It was Mrs. Green who interviewed Lois, with a wealth of descriptive statement.

“ ‘Nugent,’ she give her name, ‘Mrs. Nugent,’ and I see the ring on her finger first thing. Poor young thing, and scarce a crumb have passed her lips since under this roof she’s been, not enough to feed a bird, as you might say. ‘Let me set the gramophone a-going, ’twill cheer you up,’ I said to her only this morning. Them was my very words, and for her to be took. It do seem hard,” and Mrs. Green blew her nose sympathetically.

“We can make a try with the name, anyhow,” said Lois, when at last they were left alone together. She took a pencil from her pocket and wrote a message on the back of an envelope: “Mr. Nugent, Ashtock, Devon. Please come to your wife as soon as possible,” and she added the address. “It cannot do any harm to send it, and see what happens.”

Allan went out again into the dampness to despatch it, while his sister waited in the dreary little room. There was a smell of chemicals about the nurse’s cloak and bonnet, flung across the couch. Lois was thinking of the girl upstairs, the unknown girl who had come so oddly into her brother’s life, of the husband down in Devon waiting probably for news of her, and the strange revolution of the wheel of destiny that had flung

them all together in this unexpected, unexplained fashion. She did not wish to question Nallie. She knew how explanation irked him at all times. She had been waiting for something to happen—it usually did when he avoided her. But this was something bigger and more unfamiliar than usual, and far more inexplicable.

She sat in the sick-room a little later, while the nurse had her tea. The wide grey eyes stared at her without question or interest. The only sound in the little room was that short and rapid breathing, and an occasional attack of painful coughing. The leaden hue had deepened, changing Sareel's face so completely that to one who knew her it would now have looked strange and unfamiliar. After a short time the nurse returned and Lois went down to the room below.

Allan came back.

"Nurse thinks that the crisis will occur in about twenty-four hours from now," she told him. "I am going to ask the Vice if I may stay here for a few days. I could not leave her, at any rate until her husband comes."

"No," he answered her, in a flat toneless voice. "The doctor may be wanted suddenly in the night. I shall get a note from him and show the Master and see if he will give me permission to stay with you. He is awfully decent in any sort of emergency usually."

She nodded.

"Wait here then until I come back." She put

on her coat and hat and went out of the house noiselessly.

Her brother sat gazing into the red depths of the fire, seeing there pictures that his mind conjured up one after another, himself and Sareel climbing the steep side of the tor, Sareel kneeling beside him, bathing his cut wrist, or sitting on the boulder in mid-stream with her feet in the water and Pete by her side. Then he thought of her face as it had looked against his shoulder two hours ago, pinched and dulled, transformed out of all likeness to its soft young beauty and charm. There was no room in his mind for anything at the moment but a long procession of mental pictures, one after the other in an endless string. Once a door upstairs opened, and he jumped up and went on silent feet to investigate, but it had shut again and all was silent except for hurrying feet outside of people going home from work, and the evening noises of the street.

Lois was soon back. She carried a suit case and had obviously hurried.

"It was all right. The Vice was quite agreeable, although she may have to speak to the Principal about it in the morning. Now, Nallie, be sensible, go back to your dinner in Hall in any case, eat a good one remember, just to please me." She still adopted the coaxing tone with which she had wheedled him when he was ill as a boy. His miserable eyes, however, did not lighten now, and she let him go without further word or admonition.

There was Mrs. Green to interview next. That lady spoke in husky undertones as though the invalid were in earshot. She had taken a sudden fancy to this direct, outspoken young woman with her absence of "side" and her friendly calm eyes. Lois Liddle owned the knack of being able to get her own way with all manner of dissimilar folk; and she listened again, without obvious boredom, to the reiterated story of the day before, and all Mrs. Green's sage and prescient comments, every one of which seemed already to be fulfilled.

"If I may have a kettle, some more coal, and a teapot and some milk," Lois suggested, when the husky voice ceased temporarily, "and two cups, my brother may come and sit up with me. I've brought tea in my case."

Mrs. Green intimated that the whole contents of her house, such as they were, existed for Miss Liddle's convenience. Lois smiled her quick responsive smile that, like the Pied Piper's, "went out and in." A good many people had done things merely on account of that flashing smile of hers, although its owner was sublimely unaware of the fact.

The doctor came later and stayed upstairs a long time. He looked in to see Lois for a minute. He had not much time to spare, and she did not detain him with many questions.

"Grave? I am afraid so. With your consent I think I'd like to ask Alldridge to look in and have a squint at her in the morning."

"Of course." Lois knew Sir Fleming Alldridge by repute as a famous consultant.

"There'll be another nurse round at eight o'clock to-morrow. This one is jolly good. I've had her on several difficult cases. You can trust her absolutely," and he was gone.

Mrs. Green reappeared with a tray on which was a large cake, a loaf, half a pound of butter and a pot of jam. She had that fifteen shilling deposit that she had asked for on her mind, being a really good-natured woman and sympathetic to all illness and misfortune.

Presently Allan reappeared; and after Mrs. Green had said a final good-night, Lois lay back in the only comfortable chair that the room contained, watching the curling rings of smoke float across the room from her brother's cigarette. After a time he began to talk, fitfully, with long pauses and jerks, of Sareel, of his attraction to her, her uniqueness and appeal, the long inexplicable silence, and then the alteration in himself, the almost insensible, slow change that the months wrought in him.

Lois did not interrupt him by as much as a monosyllable. How well she knew that process of disintegration in him! As a child it had been toys that he tired of, as a school-boy, pursuits—stamp-collecting, photography, geology—as a young man, sketching, dancing, motor-cycling, swimming. Each in turn had occupied him from keenness to boredom, finally disappearing altogether. She had often mocked him for it, and

he had argued hotly and interminably against her. To-night she did not attempt to reason with him. This was something bigger, more important, fateful. She had hoped so much of late that he had grown out of these mercurial ups and downs, that he had become more stable. She was devoted to Nallie, and always had been: it was partly the need to be near him constantly that had brought her to Cambridge.

"Why don't you slang me? I deserve it, Lois," his low voice of self-depreciation broke across her musings and shattered them.

"My dear!" She shrugged her shoulders.

He slipped off his chair onto the threadbare hearthrug and leaned his head against her knees, in a favourite attitude of his. Her long flexible fingers, so like his own, smoothed back the tumbled hair from his hot brow.

"Why am I not more like you?" he asked under his breath. "Lois, suppose she is going to die! I couldn't bear it. . . . I couldn't." He covered his eyes with his hands.

She could feel his body tremble from head to foot. Her fingers moved mechanically. For a time she made no answer. They hurt her, those words of his, "I couldn't bear it," with their unconscious egotism and self-absorption.

"We won't suppose that—yet," she said in her level quiet voice. "Sir Fleming Alldridge is coming in to-morrow. We will have anybody else he may suggest down from town. We won't wait for her husband's advice or permission. He cannot

object . . . for it must be our concern, yours and mine, Nallie." She imagined a countryman objecting to expense, unable possibly to stand it.

"Yes, ours," he assented. "How strange her getting married! It was such a lonely place. I could not imagine her marrying the sort of man she would be likely to meet about there. I must have idealised her no end, of course. One does unconsciously." He was making excuses for himself in the old way with which she was so familiar.

She made no answer to this. He turned and looked at her.

"You despise me then? I knew you would. Explanations are so crude and clumsy. It cannot be put into words. But," contradicting himself instantly, "I hoped you would understand, you of all people. I didn't fancy that you would condemn me."

"Do I?" she asked him tersely. "If so, you know more of me than I do myself."

He buried his head in her lap. He longed so desperately for comfort, for soothing words and reassurances that after all he had only acted prudently, as any sensible person would when the glamour and romance of the affair had worn off. She gave him nothing of this. Back of her mind floated words, spoken years before by her mother in her last illness: "You'll look after Allan. Protect him from himself and don't let him excuse himself to himself all his life long." It was an impossible task. She knew it now, well enough. Against outer foes she might be of some use,

but against the enemy within the gates, never.

A little later Allan flung himself across the sofa and went fast asleep. His sister wrapped her big coat over his body and sat watching the immobile face, attractive even in repose, under its tumbled masses of dark hair. Her heart was sore within her. Most sisters might have felt satisfaction at a brother having escaped marriage with a farm servant. But there was no tinge of class feeling about Lois Liddle. She thought of the girl waiting through all those long silent months, and then following the dictates of her own heart on the impulse of the moment, throwing all else aside without a second thought. There was something in her own nature that could understand and respond to that impetuosity, something that stirred now below her perplexity and uneasiness. She must try to make up to her in some slight measure for Nallie's defection. She would never forgive herself if she failed here. There was something big and generous about Lois Liddle, something that drew hearts to her and kept them there.



## CHAPTER XVIII.

That Saturday afternoon, when Sareel had taken her sudden departure from the cottage, Bob Nugent was later than usual in getting back. He had ordered some new books, and the order had been wrongly executed. He set it right at the shop, but spent an hour in looking through the others. He hurried over the moor as he realised the lateness of the hour. As he gained the top of the rise, his eyes sought the lighted windows of the cottage through the damp twilight greyness. He could not find them as usual, but he told himself that his wife was probably busy at the back and had forgotten to light the lamp.

As he pushed open the door and went in he found the fire had died down to a red mass. Jimbo came rubbing against his legs mewing piteously. The house struck desolate upon his senses. He called "Little 'un, where are you?" There was no answer. He put off the heavy knapsack from his shoulders and went through to the back. There was nobody there. She would probably have walked over to Emma's. She often did in the afternoons with something for her friend Jamie, a cake or a pot of jam. He threw on logs and lit the lamp. There was no meal laid as usual. She must, then, have been gone some time. As soon as he sat down Jimbo jumped on his knees. He

put him down. He was in no mood for a game to-night. A vague and growing uneasiness was taking hold of him. If she did not come in half an hour he would go across to Emma's and bring her back. He took out his watch, it was a quarter to six. He didn't like her to be out on the moor alone at that hour. It was unusual for her to go off like this without a word.

Perhaps, though, she had left him a message. He looked about him and saw the scrap of paper under the letter-weight on his table. He strode over and took it up with a feeling of relief. It was not in the least like her to have left no word. He untwisted the sheet and came back to the lamp to read it.

"I am going away. I have to go. Don't worry about me. I have got to go.—S."

He read the words over several times before their true meaning dawned upon his mind. She had gone away, then, further than across the moor to Emma Vicary's. She had to go. He read the few words over again. They seemed to buzz in his ears, those brief staccato phrases. He was staggered. It was so unexpected and inexplicable. She had seemed just as usual when he had left her only a few hours ago. He was positive that nothing had happened to distress or upset her before he left. She could never hide from him any unhappiness or low spirits. He had always been able to detect in her the slightest sign of depression.

Yet at that moment he felt that he had never really known her, the inner hidden woman. Now and again he had surprised hints and echoes of her in eyes or voice, and he had waited hoping for some further revelation, some closer sign. For all her apparent transparent simplicity of nature he had long become aware of depths unplumbed. He knew that she was inarticulate; he would never have forced her to express herself in any way. He had waited and been content to wait for knowledge of the complete woman. He had realised that in her good time he might be permitted to know her in her fulness and entirety.

This was the first bitter blow. The dream was shattered, and, dreamer as he was by temperament, this hurt seemed even sorer than the loss of her actual presence. She had wound herself about his heart. He had known for months now all that she had come to mean to him and his life. He told himself that he had never known what love was before, it brought back in part his youth, this reflowering of the rose of romance in middle age. Then, as a knife in his heart, came the thought that she had gone away to her first lover, some young man doubtless, that stranger of whom she had only spoken to him once, long ago.

He bowed his head upon his breast. There was a bitterness, such as he had scarcely known before, in his heart, but through it he tried to look at the truth. Youth had probably called her, and she had answered the call. He could not blame her for that. He would not if he could. But what

manner of man was this to whom she had gone? Could he trust her with him, his little one, his cherished wild bird? Would he surround her with the tenderness and love she needed, the care and gentle protection? Would he give as well as take? For he knew by this time that she would never ask. He must learn these things for himself. He must find her whereabouts, and see face to face the man for whose sake she had left him in this sudden and impulsive fashion.

Long into the night he tramped up and down the stone-paved floor, wrestling with his thoughts, his doubts and fears. They fastened upon his mind like stinging insects. They stung him in unexpected places. How could he track her? By what means reach her before it was too late? He must do so at all costs.

And then his mood would alter swiftly. She had made her choice between himself and another man. Why should he interfere? Had he not once told her that the only bond that counted in his view between man and woman was the voluntary one? He must stand to his word now. The voluntary tie between them had snapped. She had broken it with her own hands. What was there more to do or say in that case? Liberty was always there to be taken, if she wished, and she had taken it. In all honour then he was bound to let her go free. This was but the carrying out of all the principles of his life and creed.

He flung himself down in his chair, only to leave

it and tramp again up and down, to and fro, the long night through.

The whole place was redolent of her. There on the window seat was her work-basket, beside it the book "Owd Bob" that he had been reading to her only the night before. Was it indeed no longer ago than that? It seemed that years separated him from that quiet homely scene, with the lamplight shining on her hair, and her calm sweet face bent over her sewing across the hearth.

How had he failed her? In what way or word? He had meant to ask so little of her always. But something deep down in his heart told him that women were not held to men that way. Perhaps he ought to have demanded more of her, from the first. He could not have done so. Even with this end before his eyes he could never have forced her to a single service or unwilling act. It was the law of his being, and could no more be set aside than the stars changed from their unalterable courses.

She had gone out of his life, and it was emptier without her than he could have deemed possible a few months before. He told himself that he would not delude himself with any hope of her return, that to do so would only be weakness and feeble desire that could in all probability never be gratified. He had been feeling of late so secure, and security had fallen to pieces like a house of cards. He was not the sort of man to whine against the injustice of fate. He was too strong for that. He told himself that he had left to him the memory

of those months with her. Nobody could rob him of that.

By some means or other he must get news of her, and send her word that he would always be here for her to come back to, when or if her new life failed her. That was all that he wanted to say, but that must be said, and having said it he would wait. There were all the old pursuits that used to satisfy him left; but he turned away from them at that moment with horror. The soul had gone out of them for him now, and he was lonelier than ever before.

He went up stairs. There were signs of her haste here. Clothes scattered about the room, drawers open, shoes strewn over the floor. He hated disorder. He put the room tidy again. She would never have left it like this if she had not been in a desperate hurry. What had been the final touch? There was no post to bring letters. It must have been a visitor, and yet he had a feeling that nobody had been there. He picked up, among the litter of blouses and ties, an envelope addressed to Miss S. Hill at Ridge Farm. The writing was educated, but it seemed to afford no clue to her going. He put it back in the drawer, touching her things gently and lingeringly. Perhaps she would like them sent after her later. He would make enquiries.

The wind had risen again and went crying round the house like a wild thing in dire pain. Where was she now? With her lover secure and content? He told himself that he must get used

to that thought, even as he winced at its agony. He would release her for this other man. That would be his bounden duty, of course. But suppose the man was unworthy of her? What would be his duty then? He went downstairs again, puzzling the problem out and trying to find a solution for it. It was like fighting mist. There was no clear or certain fact with which to grapple. All eluded him, mocking him with the futility and hopelessness of search.

He tried to smoke, but pipe after pipe went out unfinished. The cold grey light of morning stole into the room with eerie chill, and touched the edges of familiar things and surfaces. His face was the face of one who has struggled with mortal agony and doubt. The fire had sunk to a heap of pearly ash. Jimbo, curled into a grey ball, slept on the cushion of his mistress's chair. Nugent got up, stiff and numbed with the long hours of his vigil. He thought that it suited his new way of life without her, the eerie, unfriendly morning with that cold and steely light that seemed to rob all things of their homely human aspect.

All through the long hours of the day his mind see-sawed between hope and dread; and when night fell again he shuddered at the thought of the hours of darkness. It seemed incredible that the absence of one little human being could make all the difference to his life, create the aching void and desolation that he had been conscious of each moment since she had gone. He tried to forget her, in doing the homely things that she

never neglected. He worked in the garden during the two following days, and each time he came indoors with a fresh surprise of loneliness leaping out at him from the empty house.

He tried to drown his thoughts in work that night, but the words danced up at him from the white page, and he found that he had written unintelligible nonsense. He forced himself to coherency, but the effort was too painful to be prolonged. He flung it all aside and came back to his long thoughts by the fire, to his hopes and fears of revolving brain that seemed to work automatically. To-morrow he told himself that he would act, do something, anything to find out where she was and with whom. He must discover both those facts. It was imperative. Somebody must know. She could not have gotten away quite unnoticed.

And then his mind shrank from the brutality of question and enquiry with regard to her, his wife. He thought of her name taken lightly on men's lips, and the vulgar conjecture that would of a certainty follow his investigations. His brain reeled. He bowed his head on his arms and prayed with a fervour such as he had not known since his boyhood's days, that he might be guided to the right path, that he might know no other thought than her service and duty, that he might shut out self and all the paltry motives that self engenders, in the single desire to help and succour her.

It seemed a direct answer to his prayer when



next morning he heard steps along the flagstones of the garden path, and a hand was thunderous with the knocker. A boy handed him an orange envelope.

"Comed too late fer delivery last night. Any answer?" and he waited, whistling a music hall air, while the gaunt man in the doorway tore open the thin envelope with shaking fingers and devoured at a glance the brief message within.

"Wait a minute." He went inside, wrote hastily, and brought out the sheet of paper and money.

The boy read it aloud—"Coming at once. Nugent," and went off still whistling.

He spread the sheet in front of him and read the words again: "Please come to your wife as soon as possible, 42 Cowling Road, Cambridge." They hammered at his brain with great thuds, so that there was a singing noise in his ears. Then he went upstairs, three steps at a time, and tumbled things into a kit-bag. His mind moved automatically, so that every detail was clear to him. He would take Jimbo on his way to Emma Vicary, and he would catch the 10.43 at Ashstock. That would enable him to catch the 12.57 from Exeter. With luck he would get to Liverpool Street in time for the four o'clock, if not he would telegraph from there and go by the 5.17. He did not stop to ask himself what had taken Sareel so far away. There was no need of torturing questions any longer. He locked up the house and was off in twenty minutes, Jimbo mewing

disconsolately in the depths of his coat pocket.

Emma was very curious as to his journey, and why his wife had said nothing to her and had gone first without him.

"Niver wan to go fur anytime," she said, casting inquisitive eyes at the man who was in such obvious haste; "look arter the cat! ees vay! Jamie be most mazed to have'en agen. They'll play together, brave and vine. When be coming back here agen?" but Nugent was off, and she could not catch the words he shouted back over his shoulder. He had put some money into her hand, which she had not wished to accept, although it would come in very handy for the children's boots. She put it safely in the pocket of her underskirt, and went back to her interrupted washing. "Brave and queer, I do seem, a-gwine off wan arter t'ther they ways. There! I dessay as the maid's gittin' like gintry nowadays, up and off wi'out zo much a thought to the cost o't. That's about the truth of't I'll lay, and he that wropped up in her as a body can see wi' half an eye in their 'ead."

Lois Liddle got the second telegram that afternoon. Sir Fleming Alldridge had just gone. He had been non-committal and had murmured something about "the wonderful reserves of youth" that had told her he thought seriously of the invalid's condition. Allan had been up and down all day. He came now and she showed him the message just received.

"Somebody ought to meet him," she said.

The other looked away from those frank eyes on his. He knew that what she meant was "You ought to go," and he shrank from the idea.

"I can manage it," she said after a pause. "I wonder how I shall know him? I suppose I must look out for somebody bucolic and countrified."

"I suppose so." Allan was looking out of the window, his shoulders hunched up in the way that showed he was ill at ease.

"What are you going to say to him?" asked that resonant voice behind him.

He flared up suddenly. His nerves had been on edge all these days, and he told himself that Lois ought to have known that.

"Heavens! how do I know? It's the devil of a mess isn't it? I don't see what is to be said. Anyhow I am not going to say it, and that's the truth," and he turned away again with that same impatient twist to his shoulders she knew so well.

"Then I must," said that low vibrating voice again; "there's nobody else to do it; or if there were, I couldn't let them, since you won't."

"Can't you see?" he burst out at her in a voice of irritation. She looked at the ceiling and he lowered his voice: "Women don't understand, even a woman like you doesn't . . . how . . . how . . . bald and brutal things sound put into words."

"Perhaps not, but somebody has got to say them, unless even more brutal things are going to be believed."

"I know. You needn't rub it in to a fellow.

Don't you think I've had a hell of a time these days?" He still avoided her eyes.

"Yes."

"You are so calm and self-contained, yourself. You don't realise that I am different."

"Oh yes I do."

"Then why don't you show more sympathy?"

There was a silence, and then Lois began to speak of something else. His glowering eyes were on fire. She poured him out some tea, and stood over him, making him drink it and eat some of the shortbread biscuits of which he was particularly fond. He obeyed her, after some protests.

The train disgorged its occupants on to the long platform. Lois stood aside, watching the throng and wondering which was the man she sought. Nobody quite fitted in with what she expected. On some unexplained instinct she moved toward Nugent.

"Mr. Nugent?" she asked uncertainly.

"That is my name."

"Why! he's a gentleman," was her first thought as they moved away together. "It isn't far," she said, and then she hesitated.

"My wife," he asked, "how is she? I only got your message this morning. She's all right?" for a sudden premonition had come to him.

"She is ill, very ill. We had the best doctor in Cambridge to see her to-day. He has just gone. It is pneumonia, and is affecting her heart. She took a chill on the journey. Everything has been

done. We have two good nurses. I am afraid . . . that she will not know you."

He wondered idly, under his distress, who this clear-eyed, direct young woman might be. He thought her probably a relative of the head of a nursing home.

"Did she ask you to send for me?" he asked quickly. "Wish me to come?"

"I am afraid she was too ill to do that . . . but my brother made a guess at your whereabouts, and we sent, hoping to find you. We dared not risk waiting to make sure."

He bowed assent as they walked quickly through the unlovely streets to their destination. He asked briefly several questions about his wife, being plainly mystified as to what had brought her here and where she was staying. They turned in at the end of the street, and stopped at 42. This was evidently not a nursing home. His companion let him in with a latch key. The room which they entered was empty, the firelight flickered on a table laid for tea. The ugliness and common tawdriness was hidden in the half light from the eyes of the bewildered man.

"I'll just inquire how she is now."

He was left alone, conscious for the moment only of a great longing to follow and see with his own eyes what illness had wrought in his wife, to make sure that she was actually lying under this roof, in the care of these strangers into whose society she seemed so mysteriously to have strayed.

"No worse," said that clear low voice at his elbow, and he started visibly.

When he had refused her offer of tea and yet had somehow, in spite of refusal, found himself eating and drinking, she said suddenly:

"I have never told you my name yet. I am Lois Liddle."

His eyes wandered to her ringless hands in interrogation.

"Thank God," he said, after a pause, "that she came in her need upon such a woman as yourself, Miss Liddle."

The girl's face quivered for an instant at his deep and emphatic voice. Then she shook her head, unable for the moment to make any reply.

"I have done so little," she said after a second's interval, in a muted voice, "scarcely anything really. I thought that perhaps you would like to go round and have a talk with the doctor. He lives in the next street, and then . . . then . . . when you come back I would like to try and explain . . . if I can, something of all this strange happening. We have taken rooms for you in the next house, but perhaps you would be more comfortable at a hotel?" She was thinking how different a man they had been imagining him.

"I'd rather stay next door, near her."

He took his bag and went.

Lois sat looking straight in front of her, trying to push away from her mind all fear and shrinking from the task before her. Her will was a strong one: she never wavered from her resolu-

tion for one instant. Since Nallie would not speak, the duty was clear before her. She did not reproach him. She told herself that perhaps, after all, it was better for her to speak, that it might make the hearing easier for the man who had to listen. Then a wonder flashed through her that any woman should turn from the strong protective man, whom she had already divined the new-comer to be, for her brother—attractive, delightful, unstable creature that he was and always would be. A thought of the underlying injustice of life, and of men and women toward one another, took strong hold upon her imagination at that moment, and diverted it awhile mercifully from the interview that was every moment drawing closer.

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## CHAPTER XIX.

"Won't you smoke?" Lois Liddle looked across the hearth at those intent dark eyes watching her.

"Thank you." Nugent filled his pipe and put it in his mouth, but forgot to light it.

"Did you know anything of my brother when he stayed at Ridge Farm?" she began, plunging in *medias res*.

"Nothing. I had not even heard his name until you told it me just now." It was the first inkling that came to him of the real truth, the first time that he connected in his mind Lois Liddle's brother with Sareel's faithless first lover. "You mean that she . . . came away here . . . ." He could not finish, could not make himself utter those words.

Lois nodded. She began to explain from the very beginning, as Nallie had told it her jerkily and disconnectedly in that vigil a few nights before. She omitted nothing, not aware how much the man, listening in tense silence, already knew. It became suddenly easier than she could have deemed possible, impersonal, as though the man of whom she was speaking was not the being whom she loved best in all the world, nor the woman the wife of the man opposite, listening with all his soul, his lips set into grim lines, his eyes scarcely leaving her face for a single instant.



He only interrupted her occasionally, with a sudden question or a request for a repeated statement. She gave him the facts, such as she had learnt, without either comment or elaboration.

When she came to the account of the intercepted letters, his face changed suddenly as though he understood at last something that had baffled him for a long time. She told, just as she had heard of it from Allan's lips, Sareel's account of her discovery of the letters flung back at her by the remorseless old woman, just when she had probably imagined that they might cause her, now the wife of another man, most suffering and unhappiness. Nugent's face hardened as he listened. There would be a reckoning for him to settle there when he got back.

Then his face softened again, grew tender, as he thought of his wife, of her months of dumb misery and hopeless waiting. It was all clear, pitifully clear to his gaze now. If only she had confided in him! But he understood well enough now her reluctance to do so. She had been trying to hide a bleeding heart, and he, who had sought only to help and succour her, had been the unconscious inflicter of greater suffering yet. His heart yearned over her, the victim of this nemesis that had overtaken her, the helpless inarticulate victim pursued by a vindictive destiny. He scarcely heard what the woman across the room was saying. His brain was full of a steady resolution to give her to the other man. Whatever the cost, however great the sacrifice it entailed,

he would not falter. For her sake he would cut out as it were his own living heart, and let her go. She need not have been afraid of him. Poor child! And a great wave of compassion flooded the very recesses of his being. How he had failed in the very elements of his task if she had had even an instant's dread of him or his possible actions!

Lois had come now to the very hardest part of her explanation. She hesitated for an instant, trying to gain courage, seeking not to bungle things by any crude or unjust statement. It took all her valour. Looking back later she never remembered the exact words that she had uttered, or the exact phrases that had expressed her meaning. She was only conscious of a need to speak the truth at any cost, not to shrink from cowardice or consideration to Nallie, but to plunge the sword home and show him ugly things in all their sordid ugliness, without an instant's flinching. She did show him. Her few incisive, candid words left no doubt of her meaning. She noticed his bewilderment, incredulity, and then a flash in his eyes that told her what this meant to him. He sprang to his feet and came over to her. He took her hand in his, and said in a strange eager voice:

"You are sure of this, positive?"

"Positive!"

"There is no shadow of doubt."

"None." The tears were streaming down her cheeks. She turned her head away that he might not see them nor guess her emotion.

He could not find voice with which to thank her, but he wrung her hand in a close grip that assured her he had not misconstrued her frankness. Mrs. Green came in at that instant to set the table for a meal. Lois never blessed her interrupting presence more than at that moment. There was something of prosaic matter-of-factness about Mrs. Green that kept one's feet on solid earth and assured one of its stability.


Nugent plunged out into the damp darkness of the streets, walking through ways he remembered of old, for he was a Cambridge man himself and was familiar with every lane and street, where great shadowy towers and gateways loomed up out of the night on every side. He was not thinking of the past now, but of the tangled present and uncertain future. So he had failed her altogether now! There was no doubt of that. The blow must have been a bitter one, coming how and when it did. It was no wonder that she had collapsed under it. He must go back and find out how she was now. Suppose she never knew him again, slipped away into the unknown without one last word or glance of farewell?

He hurried back through the wet streets, striding through the mud and rain to the little house in Cowling Road. The day nurse was just leaving. He had a brief conversation with her. There was no change. The patient's temperature had not yet dropped, but that was scarcely to be expected in such a case as this for a few days. She had known it to remain at 104 degrees for eight

days. The patient had been light-headed all day; it would be wiser not to try and see her yet. The doctor would give permission as soon as possible. The nurse slipped away from more questions.

For eight days Sareel hung between life and death. The famous physician came again several times and said everything possible was being done and referred again to "youth's reserves of strength." Her mind wandered. Once the doctor had allowed her husband to steal in and look at her, without betraying his presence. It wrung his heart to see her changed almost beyond recognition, the face so pinched and drawn, great dark circles making her eyes look bigger and more plaintive than before. She lifted them to his, and his heart gave a wild throb of alarm, but there was no recognition. They seemed to look past him into something unearthly beyond.

The doctor was getting used to visits from this haggard man with his tired eyes and ceaseless questions. He tried to soothe him with cigars and offers of whisky and soda, which he invariably refused. He was a capable practitioner with modern methods, and was doing everything for this case that human wits and scientific ideas could suggest. He said that he never bothered about the psychology of his cases, that he was too much concerned with the cure of bodies to trouble himself with the study of souls. He probably knew something of both. This case interested him, and the husband was made to feel as little a nuisance as a busy doctor could manage.



Sleeplessness had been overcome by a stimulant hypnotic. Out of revenge, Doctor Curtis talked of strophanthus and paraldehyde, of hyperpyrexia and lysis. His visitor listened as patiently as though he understood, and always ended by bringing the conversation back to the doctor's own views of an ultimate recovery, a subject on which the latter was very loth to express an opinion.

"Miss Liddle will be just the sort of woman for your wife to convalesce with—healthy in body and mind, and so splendidly alive. As a matter of mere suggestion she ought to heal her instinctively. There's a tonic quality about her, don't you notice it?"

But Bob Nugent, deeply appreciative of Lois as he was, wanted to talk about his wife at the moment. Beside her and her fate, all other things and circumstances only existed to him in a vague and shadowy unreality. Even Allan Liddle, whom Lois had brought with her one afternoon, did not really arouse his interest or resentment in these odd days. The two had not much to say to one another, and the younger had soon departed, obviously relieved to escape from an embarrassing situation.

There was only one person who would listen to him for hours together without any visible signs of boredom, and that was Lois herself. She knew that she was helping him by acting as a safety valve, and since there was little she could do in other ways, she just let him talk. She could picture so well from his words the simple cottage

home on the moor, the primitive yet satisfying daily life with outdoor work, books and open air, dreams and the companionship of one another. She had probably guessed something of the depth of Bob Nugent's feeling for his wife, she had caught an echo of it in his voice, surprised hints of it on his face, without any need of further or more definite explanation.

For her part she was making plans all the while, secret plans that she had not yet spoken of to anybody. She was not going to risk their failure by a rash word or premature disclosure. Each day she detected a deeper tinge of satisfaction on Dr. Curtis' face, caught a note of hope in the tones of the nurses' non-committal phrases, and she was drawing her own pleasant conclusions from these small yet optimistic signs. She dared not raise the husband's hopes by speaking of them, and she wondered how he could be so deaf and blind as not to detect them for himself.

At last the words were spoken outright—"out of danger"—and the look of joy, of stunning, incredible joy in Nugent's eyes told its own story. He was allowed to see his wife and sit with her for ten minutes, next day twenty, and the day after for half an hour. Lois sat with her now occasionally while the nurse went for an airing or to the chemist. Sareel was weak, of course, and looked no bigger than a child with her thick chestnut plaits and her wistful grey eyes. Lois had ramsacked her wardrobe and brought her dainty

night gowns and dressing gowns, blue ribbons, and other alluring accessories of bedroom wear. She did not talk much yet. The doctor had forbidden it. Visitors were warned to be prudent. There were flowers everywhere. Nurse pretended to scold at the number of vases that Lois took out unfailingly every night. Allan sent most of the more expensive blooms. His sister never mentioned this fact; and yet she sometimes wondered if Sareel guessed, for she never wanted these near her bed by any chance. Once her husband came back triumphant with a great basket of forced violets. She loved these best of all. He scoured Cambridge shops and telegraphed to London for fresh supplies of violets after this.

Lois used often to wonder what was going on in the sick girl's mind underneath that gentle manner and those grave grey eyes. She had feared at first that Sareel would shrink away from her, feeling the pain of her relationship. But there had been no hint of this. The invalid had heard the nurse speak of Miss Liddle long before she connected the name with that new face that came and went about her bed. She had shrunk at first from the certain likeness, those dark eyes under their straight dark brows, the curve of cheek and forehead, so indisputably the same. Her heart had given one wild leap, weeks before, at the first conscious hearing of that resonant voice. She had grown accustomed to it by this time, and her pulses no longer stirred at its clear accents.

She had never disentangled events, nor questioned within herself how her husband had got here. She accepted life without protest. She went with the tide, too weak to resist or rebel. Interest had been burnt out of her. Nothing mattered much. Everybody was very kind and took all sorts of trouble for her. She had unaccustomed dainties to eat. She drank wine, who in all her life had never tasted it before. She ate and drank, because it was too much bother to refuse food and drink, because it was brought to her, and the easiest thing was to take it without protest.

Dr. Curtis began to talk of the need of a change of air, fresh scenes, and the interest that they might be expected to awaken in the invalid. Lois Liddle propounded her long-laid scheme at this point—to the doctor first, to make sure that it would be permissible. He encouraged her, so she tackled Nugent himself.

“I want to know if you will trust your wife to me for a time. Dr. Curtis prescribes change of air, and I advise Wraxton air. It is my home, you know, the Liddle home for generations. It can be ready to receive us in twelve hours or so. The house is never closed. It has a guardian angel, our old nursery governess, who looks after the animals and keeps things going for us down there. It belongs to the three of us, my elder brother Alec in India, Allan, and myself. It is a peaceful old place. She could sit in the garden and listen to the doves, nurse my cat ‘Miss Miggs,’ and make the dogs horribly jealous. I believe it



would really be the place of all others for her now."

"It sounds so, but have we not taken up too much of your time already with our affairs? What will the Principal say to your neglected term?"

She laughed. They had gone for a walk together. Everything was growing green and springlike.

"She has given me up as hopeless by this time. I saw it in the resigned gaze she cast upon me at our last interview. Then you consent, if your wife agrees? You will come down with us and see the place for yourself, stay too if you care to, of course?"

"Thank you. I think, though, that I must be getting back west now that Sareel is so much better. The place will want looking after. I had been worrying rather about the future, I must confess. You have solved the problem for me."

Her suggestion relieved him greatly; for he had been anxious of late as to the best thing to do.

"You have done more for me . . . for both of us than I can put into words," he said at last when they turned back.

She gave a little protesting shake to her shoulders, and laughed dissent. Then her face grew grave and she said low under her breath, yet distinctly:

"Don't you think that some payment was due from my family to yours? Don't try to stop my paying some little part of it. It is justice and my pleasure too."

"Thank you," was all his reply, and it was

the only time that the matter was ever so much as hinted at between them.

It was Lois who told Sareel of the plans they had made for her. She assented to them without any sign of interest. If they wanted her to go it was easier to give in than protest, so she gave in. She made no comment, and asked no questions, but listened to the brief description given her, as though it had nothing to do with herself and concerned some strangers with regard to whose affairs she was apathetic.

"You will let me know from time to time how she is?" said Nugent on the night before departure.

"I will write you a faithful account twice a week, until she is strong enough to send you one herself."

The man's lips tightened at these last words. Lois wondered how she had managed to hurt him. Then she thought of her own obtuseness in not understanding before. He did not know yet what was going to happen between his wife and himself, was sure if they would drift further and further away from one another upon a sea of misunderstanding, or come together again and make life worth while for both in a truer, deeper fashion than ever before. She could not speak of this. She could only strive to bring about reunion, to show to each the heart of the other, when she was sure that she knew it intimately enough, to try to join what one of her blood had so unthinkingly and certainly been the cause of separating.

## CHAPTER XX.

It was May, and the long grey front of the old house on the hill lay basking in the sunlight. The gardens and lawns dropped down in terrace upon terrace to the swiftly flowing river below. There was apple-blossom everywhere, boughs and leaves hidden away by the masses of bloom. Against a fair blue sky the soft colouring was beautiful beyond words. The lilac bushes were bursting into flower, purple and soft blues, and creamy white. The tall guelder-rose trees by the wall hung their bunches of greenish white tufts that would soon open into warmly-tinted white flowers. The soft warm fragrances of flower and grass and resinous branch came and went waveringly in gusts of sweetness.

Indoors somebody was singing softly, a happy song that seemed to match the sunshine and the blue sky. Sareel's long chair was placed in the sunshine, with its back to the south wall, where great parallel boughs of cherry coloured japonica made a harmony with the grey stone of its background. A grey Persian cat was asleep across her lap. By her side, on a trailing end of the Italian silk rug that covered her feet, sat a Highland terrier, who cocked his nose disapprovingly at the favoured animal lying in the very place where he would be. A mongoose with his trailing

grey tail ran across the grass and sat watching the scene with bright eyes from a lower branch of a tree. Tim hated the mongoose with all the fervour of his Highland soul, but he knew that he must restrain his hatred because of the mysterious dislike of his adored mistress to any warfare.

Sareel had a book beside her, but she was not reading. Her eyes were fixed on the wide stretch of rolling country that lay like an undulating plain before her gaze. There were kingcups glowing gold in the sunlight by the marshy edges of the river. Her hostess, knowing that she loved wild flowers better than all the treasures of the garden, had brought her a bunch only yesterday. Lois had gone down to the quaint old town, with its grey gabled houses and narrow streets, to shop this morning. Sareel missed her presence greatly. It was the beginning of feeling in her, that sense of a void, that nameless lack that she had lately become aware of when Lois was absent.

Somebody came out of the house and moved along the terrace to her chair. It was Miss Denison, "Denny" she had been called by "the children" ever since she came to the house twenty-six years before. She was part of the family now, this kindly, absent-minded, inconsequent woman who, when she had taught the children, had passed them on to more capable teachers and become their mother's companion and secretary. She was always forgetting things. It was just part of Denny not to remember at the right time.

There was a note of distress in her voice now.

"Lois has gone, hasn't she, Mrs. Nugent?"

Sareel always started when she was addressed thus.

"Yes. She went through the garden twenty minutes ago."

"Dear, dear! and I quite forgot to remind her about ordering some blotting paper. There isn't a scrap in the house. Dear Lois!"

Denny sat down on a wicker chair that Lois had been occupying, and the little chains and ornaments she always wore jingled in chorus. She fingered a favourite locket mechanically, opening it and gazing fondly at the round childish faces of Allan and Lois inside.

"They were so exactly alike," she cooed, passing the locket over for Sareel to look at. "I can't think why dear Nallie has not been down to see me for such a time. I never remember him staying away so long as this. I must ask Lois what is keeping him."

Sareel's fingers let the trinket drop. Denny picked it up and shut it with a click.

"It is time you had your hot milk and cake," she said, bustling away, with her chains and trinkets rattling as she went.

Sareel lay thinking. She knew why Allan avoided his old home nowadays, and Lois knew to. Presently she saw Lois coming up the garden path. She wore a blue linen gown and a blue hat that made her look the girl she really was, for all her wise moods of maturity. She waved a hand

to Sareel as soon as she caught sight of her, and presently dropped into the chair beside the invalid.

"Well, been a good child?" she asked, stretching out a sunbrowned hand to the small white one that lay along the edge of the *chaise longue*. Her lithe fingers, warm and magnetic, closed over the limp fingers, so smooth and soft these days.

"Quite good."

Lois smiled her commendation.

"This afternoon I shall take you for a walk. Don't frown, a short walk only. You are only shamming now, you know, and I've found you out."

Sareel withdrew her hand from that firm strong clasp.

"Lois," she said, sitting up straight in her chair, "why does Allan never come here now? Denny has been talking about it. I know. It is because I am here."

Lois's face changed suddenly.

"Denny talks a lot of nonsense at times," she said quickly.

Sareel interrupted her without apology.

"I don't want to be the cause of his staying away from home. Will you ask him to come soon?"

"Perhaps. But why should I ask him?"

"Because I don't like his not coming."

"I see."

Lois wrote the next day to Allan and told him what Sareel had said. He replied that he would

come for the next week-end. She gave a brief account in her bi-weekly letter to Robert Nugent. She hesitated at first, and then reflected that it would show a renewal of Sareel's interest in life, and as such be welcomed by him. Her thoughts were often with Nugent nowadays. He wrote well and easily, and she enjoyed his letters and shared them with Sareel. He wrote his wife also constantly, but although she sent him frequent messages by Lois, she had not yet written to him herself.

"There is a great improvement in her. I can see it every day. Won't you come soon and see it with your own eyes? Dr. Tugwell was in yesterday and said that there was no need now for more than a weekly visit from him. Does that not speak for itself?"

In this strain Lois wrote to the absent husband. She knew that Sareel was making progress. The weeks of rest and quiet in good country air had done their work. The visitor felt at home in this peaceful place. It was all a new life to the unsophisticated girl who had come to it out of deep waters. She began to talk now to Lois, fitfully, of her life at the farm, her work and duties; but she never spoke of her love of the moor, nor of her life with her husband.

Allan came the next week. Lois was a little nervous for the first few hours. Underneath her brother's talk and bubbling nonsense she could

detect the same uneasiness in him. But Sareel was quite calm. She did not say much to him nor he to her. At dinner Denny did most of the talking, babbling on from topic to topic. After dessert talk faltered suddenly. Neither of the three seemed able to find a word with which to break the silence. It was Lois at last who rose and said:

"I am going to take you right away to bed. Why, it is past nine already! You are usually upstairs by this time."

Sareel made no protest. She was glad to go. She took Allan's hand to say good-night and went off quickly.

"You mustn't come . . . not to-night. I can manage quite well. Of course I can," Sareel insisted as Lois followed her up the flight of wide stairs. But she could not shake off the light pressure of the hand upon her shoulder.

"Ingrate! So this is the way I am repaid," mocked Lois as they passed down the long corridor to the spacious room at its end that was the visitor's.

As soon as they got inside Lois saw that Sareel was very tired, too tired even to talk. She undressed her as deftly as though she had been a child, pulled down the masses of hair, brushed and plaited them, tying each pigtail with a blue ribbon.

At last Sareel was lying among the pillows of the big bed, with its faded needlework hangings of peacocks and pæonies meandering over a dusky



ivory-tinted ground. Lois knew that it was wiser to slip away, without the usual nightly talk when she sat on the edge of the bed gossiping until the clock in the corridor struck ten. They were neither lavish of caresses, but to-night she stooped and kissed the wan face among its white pillows, and the other clung to her an instant before she let her go.

"Sleep well, my chicken! If when I come to bed you are still awake, I shall scold you within an inch of your life, so beware! None of your old tricks now, remember!" and she was gone, closing the door gently behind her, her light step inaudible as she ran along the corridor and downstairs.

She was frowning a little as she went, a little uncertain whether her experiment was not going to be a disastrous failure after all. "I shall never forgive myself if this throws her back again," she told herself. "It will be all my doing if she is any the worse for his coming." Then she smoothed her brow, unwilling to share her concern with either of the pair in the drawing-room.

Nallie was playing softly to himself at the grand piano at the other end of the long room. His head was swaying with the music, the room full of its low sweetness. Denny at her little table by the big shaded lamp was, oblivious of all else, engrossed in her nightly game of patience. Lois stepped softly across the room to a couch, and sat listening to the flood of music that filled the room. Nallie had always played well, but she

recognised to-night that there was a new skill, an added power and depth in his playing, something definite, hints only of which she had heard in his music before. Then he left the piano and came over to her couch.

"You didn't play like this the last time you were here," she said.

He laughed happily. She could only just see his face in the shadows of the dim flower-scented room. He curled himself up on the rug at her feet and rested his head against her knee, a fashion beloved of their schoolroom days.

They were silent for some minutes. Then Denny got up and began to put away her cards. She kissed them both good-night in an absent-minded fashion, her thoughts still busy with her game. Allan got up and opened the door for her. She kept him for a few minutes listening to the subject still troubling her. Then she kissed him again and fluttered across the hall.

He came back to his lowly position at his sister's feet. Lois ran her long fingers through the tumbled dark hair against her gown. She felt very happy at that instant. Her brother had come back to her in the old familiar way and her heart was full to overflowing with thankfulness. Allan fidgeted and began to finger the ornament on her dainty suede slipper. She knew that he was going to confide in her.

He began to talk of his music.

"You've heard me talk of Dalton, the fellow who's such a dab at music? A friend of his has

influence with Wienaleski and he may be able to get him to hear me play. It's an awfully difficult matter to get him to consent to listen to anyone who is not absolutely first class. . . . Dalton says, though, that he'll do for his friend what he won't for anyone else on earth. I've swotted at my music no end this term. Couldn't keep away from it, in fact. Old Jim has been pretty sick with me, I can tell you. He gets furious still about my chucking boating this term. I haven't touched a racquet either, been afraid of my wrists. So you think I'm improving?"

"I know you are."

"Dalton says he is sure I am. He ought to know, he's first class himself. Did you ever hear him play? I must try and get him to come down here one week-end and give you a treat. He's simply magnificent." He laughed his gay confident laugh of old days. "Lois," his voice grew grave suddenly, "I want to ask you what you think about my writing to Alec and asking him if I can chuck my final. It's not a bit of use to me if I do get a degree, which I probably shouldn't. I want all the time for my music, every minute. I can't settle to any other work now. But it wouldn't be fair, after all Alec has done and planned, for me to chuck it without his consent."

"Oh no. It wouldn't."

He laughed and flung back his head in an effort to see her face.

"You wouldn't be an angel and —," he broke off and laughed again.

"Write for you. Oh yes. I'll write tomorrow if you like, but you must too."

"Willingly, after you. Alec will be more impressed, though, by your letter. An elder brother would be," and he quoted laughingly:

"Thy elder brother I would be  
Thy father, anything to thee."

They talked far into the night. Sareel was lying with shut eyes when her hostess stole through her room to the little dressing-room beyond, which she had occupied since Sareel's visit. And once again her thoughts went back to the lonely man on the moor—and her brother.



## CHAPTER XXII.

After Allan's week-end visit Lois began to detect a change in Sareel. It seemed as though he had stirred the deep waters of the past and set her thoughts back to them. It was Denny, though, who stirred Sareel again by a babbling question, just as she had done over Allan's coming.

It was a hot afternoon. Lois had gone off to play tennis with some friends. Denny was sitting in a low basket chair with a tray of lavender stalks on the table at her side. She was cutting off the fragrant heads one by one, and putting them into a bowl for pot-pourri. Sareel watched her in silence for some time. The scent of the lavender heads and the warm fragrances of the flowers in the borders mingled together in the sunny air. There came the whirr of a moving machine across the afternoon stillness. Denny's scissors went snip, snip, and Sareel leaned back among her red silk cushions, only drowsily conscious of sun and sweetness and colour all about her.

"How your husband must miss you! Poor man! I do feel so for him and you too, Mrs. Nugent. I always think it so very sad for husband and wife to be parted for any length of time."

Sareel sat up among her heaped silk pillows.

The drowsiness had vanished suddenly. Denny by her side went on in her inconsequent fashion to recount a most interesting story that she had just read in a magazine, concerning a husband and wife parted by a misunderstanding and reunited by meeting unexpectedly on board a P. & O. liner.

"You must not think, my dear Mrs. Nugent, that I mean to imply that anything but ill-health keeps you and your husband apart. Dear me! I do so hope that I did not give you that impression. Nothing was further from my thoughts than that; only it was so exceedingly well worked out in the story, the manner in which the wife saw her own foolish impulsiveness in coming away, and her bitter repentance and regret in so short a time after leaving her home. It was a sweet story. I don't know what reminded me of it at this moment. You must read it for yourself."

Sareel looked in front of her, scarcely conscious of the flow of babbling small talk that went on without ceasing at her side. She watched the butterflies hovering over the heliotrope blooms, the big tubs of oleanders along the edge of the terrace, the stone jars with a torrent of trailing pink ivy-leaf geraniums, tumbling over the grey stone at intervals down the long flight of steps that led to the river. She shivered slightly in spite of the sun-warmed air. For days now she had been trying to push away from her any thought of her husband. She had tried with all the forces of her will to keep herself from thinking

of him. By day and night she was conscious of the struggle. It tinged her waking hours, and hovered uneasily in and out of her dreams. It was like a child trying to keep back the incoming tide with tiny puerile hands. It was flooding in upon her at this moment, in a sweeping resistless flood that would not, could not, any longer, whatever her effort, be denied or gainsaid. It was carrying all insistently before it, drowning her in a flood of reawakened memories and regrets.

For weeks now Sareel had avoided all thought of the past. At first after her illness her mind had been blank, then out of the void had come desultory memories easy to be thrust away again; but ever since Allan's visit thought had become daily more coherent, unwelcomed and unpreventable. She tried with all her strength to stifle it, but it became each day stronger, more impossible to stifle. Thought was growing stronger than her will, was conquering it, would not be denied, returned stronger than before after each repulse, demanding attention and receiving it at length, unwillingly, irrevocably. It was doing so now, thrusting her own feeble efforts aside, rushing through her mind like a brimming, powerful torrent.

When Lois came back in the cool of the evening she saw at once that there was something amiss, but she made no comment and asked no questions. She would wait her time, and then if necessary she would speak openly, perhaps cruelly or brutally, but when the time came and speech was

imperative she would have to speak; until then it was more prudent to say little.

"Had some good games?" asked Sareel, making a great effort to throw off her preoccupation.

"Rather! Some simply ripping ones. Mrs. Tarver asked me why I did not bring you to look on. They've got a priceless garden. But I told her you were not going anywhere just yet. You ought to be grateful to me: once you begin you are lost for ever," and she touched with her long-fingered hand the pale cheek next her.

Sareel smiled a little witsfully. Then they relapsed into silence, a long unbroken silence. It was one of Lois's most shining merits never to force talk beyond a certain point. Her companion had never blessed her more certainly for that merit than she did secretly at this moment.

Sareel, though beginning to protest against the indolence of the habit, still breakfasted in bed. The next morning Lois brought her a letter from her husband. She had got one herself and sat on the edge of the big bed and read it aloud. She had risen earlier this morning, almost at day-break, to have a swim with a friend in her bathing pool. She saw that Sareel was in no hurry to open and read her husband's letter, and resolved suddenly to probe with a question those depths about which she was still in complete ignorance.

"When are you going to write to him yourself, I wonder? But perhaps you have written already; only I, having got into the habit of know-



ing all your ways, imagine that you cannot even send a letter to your husband without consulting me about it. Confounded cheek on my part, isn't it?" she smiled.

"No. I have not written to him yet," the words fell slowly from the other's lips, almost unwillingly, they sounded.

"Why not?" asked Lois, all the chaff gone suddenly from her voice, the smile from her lips.

For some minutes she received no answer. Sareel was studying intently, with lowered eyes, the pattern of the breakfast service on the bed table by her side. The questioner waited in that quiet unfidgeting way of hers, without speaking or wandering from the unanswered question. Neither did she seem at all impatient. There was a long interval. Then at last Sareel spoke in a muted voice:

"Because I don't know what . . . to say to him."

The long-delayed halting explanation was uttered at last, and the speaker lay back among her pillows, her face flushing and paling and then flushing again.

Lois waited and then went on in her resonant agreeable voice:

"I think if I were you I'd try and find something to say to him . . . anything. I fancy that he is waiting for a line from you, looking out for a letter every day. I'd send him one, I think. Why not to-day?"

"Oh no! I can't"—the grey eyes held a fleeting

look of pain and then of panic, that vanished leaving them more inscrutable than before.

"I think I would. Make an effort."

Sareel buried her face among the pillows saying:

"Not yet . . . I can't."

Lois sat on waiting until she should raise her head once more. The sunlight, partly shaded by green outside blinds, flickered in from the wide-open windows and lay across the faded eastern carpet, with its patches of orange and blue colouring starting up to life again where the sunlight caught and revived them.

Sareel looked up after a time. Her eyes were wet. Feeling brutal yet resolute Lois made no sign that she noticed them.

"I think if I were you I'd write to-day or to-morrow. I fancy if one shrinks from doing a thing it is generally better to up and at it, straight off, easier somehow than thinking of it andfunking it more each time."

"I've wanted to speak to you about . . . what's going to happen. I've put it off, as you say."

Lois nodded sagely.

"One does, my child, put off difficult things. Fire away."

"I don't know what to do. I ought to leave here soon. You've been so good to me, so——."

"Rot!" counselled Lois tersely, "we'll take all that as said."

"I don't know where to go."

"But you'll go back to Ashstock when you're

ing all your ways, imagine that you cannot even send a letter to your husband without consulting me about it. Confounded cheek on my part, isn't it?" she smiled.

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"I don't know what to do. I ought to leave here soon. You've been so good to me, so——."

"Be counselled Lois tersely, "we'll take  
"th . . . to go."

Ashstock when you're

really fit again, child. Where else would you go?"

"I couldn't . . . not now . . . after what's been."

"Look here, let us have it all out, shall we? I don't believe in dodging things. Don't you know that Mr. Nugent is just eating his heart out for you to go home? Counting the days until you write and tell him you are going back?"

"No. I don't know that."

"I know it well enough, and so will you if you will only open your eyes and see what is staring you in the face."

"Has he told you that?"

"Not in actual words, but I didn't need them. One is not so crude as all that. One has eyes and ears in one's head."

"He has never told me. . . . I couldn't expect it. . . . I don't. If I write and say, as you suggest, that I am coming, I know that he will pretend to be glad. He is like that. But he couldn't be really . . . after what I've done. . . . You don't know. I can't explain how it is. You couldn't know. I don't see how he can be sure . . . now. No man could after how I've acted."

"I'd just like to take you by your two shoulders and try and shake a little common sense into you," said Lois, with a smile that belied the ferocity of her words. "Well, I suppose since I have got you so absolutely at my mercy, I shall have to relent." She slipped off the edge of the

bed and, tweaking one of the thick chestnut plaits that lay across the pillows, walked to the door. "I'll turn on your bath in three quarters of an hour, not one minute earlier, so lie there until you hear it running, like a good obedient child."

Nothing more was said between them on the subject of Robert Nugent for some days; only Lois noticed that her guest had longer spells of silence than usual, and when she enquired each morning if she had slept well, Sareel always managed to change the topic without direct reply, from which she drew her own conclusions.

"She has got to fight it out alone," Lois told herself. "I know now exactly how an old hen feels about her one chick, I only guessed the sensation previously. It is not exactly pleasant, and yet one has a proud maternal sensation, quite thrilling in its own peculiar way. I wonder what would have happened to her if Nallie had not had the amazing resource to send for me, or if I had not been in Cambridge at that particular moment? There! isn't that exactly like a fond mamma, imagining that nobody in the wide world can do anything but herself for her dear helpless daughter!"

Three days later Lois and Sareel were drinking their coffee in the library after lunch. Lois was feeling unhappy, having had a wretched letter that morning from Robert Nugent. She debated whether she should show it to Sareel. It might arouse her and show her something of the real state of affairs; on the other hand to do so would

be like betraying a confidence, and not even to bring Sareel to her senses did she feel like doing that. She looked across the room at Sareel in a queer little green frock that she, Lois, had ordered for her by Nugent's wish. Lois had taught her to do her hair in a more becoming mode, parted over the brow with the sweeping waves curving at the ears. It displayed the shape of her small, well-poised head, and the friend surveying her wondered if it could be sober fact that she had once been a farm servant, doing rough monotonous work, drudging year after year, as she had been told, at the beck and call of a tyrannical old woman.

As though she guessed her thoughts, Sareel began to speak of those days. She had often touched upon them tentatively before, but now she spoke in detail. Lois leaned forward listening, her hands clasped together in a way that showed the intensity of her interest.

"Tell me all, I want to hear it every bit from you. Don't shy at details, however trivial, I can swallow no end from you."

Sareel began with her going to Ridge Farm from Ashstock Union at the age of sixteen and a half. She was twenty-one now. It seemed a lifetime across which she looked back at the awkward, ignorant girl who had been herself. She spoke of her instant passion for the moor. Her face quivered as she talked and the memory of it leaped up within her mind vivid and beautiful, the wine-dark moor as it would look on a day

like this, the great brooding tors watching the river, the sweep and curve and colour of the hills against the stormy sky, where the grey rain clouds raced along driven by the hurrying moaning wind as a shepherd drives his flock before him. She kept back nothing of her life there, but that one memory that she could share with no one ever, the memory of that night with Allan on the tor. It was the only one saved to her out of the wreck of her tempestuous young romance. The sole remnant, and she must preserve that, she told herself passionately. It was so light a thing to keep back. She could not share that.

She spoke quite calmly of Allan; she went into details of their talks together. She told of the day when he cut his wrist and fainted. Lois nodded. "He would do that. I've seen him topple over after the merest scratch." She spoke of Robert Nugent, of his first coming to the farm, of his kindly words; and then, after that long dark period of waiting and hoping, of the winter afternoon when he had surprised her alone and the angry old mistress had found them together and blazed out at them in bitterly coarse fury.

"He was sorry for me. He wanted to help. I see it all now as plainly as possible. He asked me to marry him and I didn't care. He never spoke of love, and so there was no repulsion in my mind toward marriage with him. He spoke as I have never heard anybody speak, of freedom, of the right to live one's own life in one's own way, and how he looked at marriage. I've



thought a thousand times of late of the words he said, and I see how he has carried out every one of them in his life and his behaviour toward me."

"He would. He is the sort of man to live his creed," broke in Lois impetuously here.

"That is why," said Sareel, with a certain impersonal note that robbed her low voice of its sweetness, "that is why I know he would never let anybody see, not even you, that he despised me . . . never."

"Despised you! Oh! my child."

"Yes . . . he must. He should, but he will never speak of it. I know that too. If I went back to him to-morrow he would give no sign, he would be kind, almost as he used to be, watch over me, save me, treat me apparently just the same."

"Apparently?"

"Yes; but I should know the difference. I should always see under his kindness his scorn, and I should know that he had a reason to despise me. I couldn't stand it. I am too much of a coward. I've thought it all over again and again. I don't know what to do. I don't see the right thing."

"I do. I am sure that you ought to go home to your husband." Lois lent forward gesticulating as was her wont when excited. "I think you are mistaken, altogether wrong in what you imagine to be your husband's attitude toward you. If I am anything of a judge he will never have a tinge of scorn toward you in his heart, never once.

Big people like him don't revenge themselves that way; perhaps it makes life sometimes all the harder when they don't. You don't see yourself in the right perspective at present. Perhaps you can't. Only wait a while longer. Don't be in too much of a hurry to spoil both your lives for a mere refusal to see clearly, a quibble, a deadness of perception. Be patient a little longer yet."

"I spoilt my life that day when I came away without a single thought of Bob or what my leaving might mean to him. I took our life together in my own hands and I flung it away like a trifle. I see now all that it was, all that he is . . . all that I am. I have no right to expect him to be unchanged. It isn't reasonable. I don't. I will show you how things were between us. After I had been married some months, perhaps three, I began to see that he was growing to care for me more . . . in a different way. I noticed how his face changed when I came into the room. I saw that he liked me near him, missed me when I was away. His voice began to change too, grew gentler, more tender. I forced myself not to shrink away from him ever. . . . I used to let him kiss me sometimes and touch my hair. I couldn't speak of this to anyone else but you. I only do to you because I want to try and show you the tangle it all is."

"Yes. I think I am beginning to understand. Go on."

"I knew at last that his first feeling of just wanting to help me, make me happier, life easier,

ing all your ways, imagine that you cannot even send a letter to your husband without consulting me about it. Confounded cheek on my part, isn't it?" she smiled.

"No. I have not written to him yet," the words fell slowly from the other's lips, almost unwillingly, they sounded.

"Why not?" asked Lois, all the chaff gone suddenly from her voice, the smile from her lips.

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"Rot!" counselled Lois tersely, "we'll take all that as said."

"I don't know where to go."

"But you'll go back to Ashstock when you're

"I have got to think," said the other, after an interval. "I can't get hold of new thoughts quickly. I am not like you. Have patience with me a little longer, please."

## CHAPTER XXIII

Robert Nugent had gone away. He had grown a little alarmed at the effect of loneliness upon himself. His habit of imagining his wife about the house was increasing. He could not settle long to his work, nor subdue his restlessness in the long tramps of old days. He put everything aside, shut up the cottage and went to town.

After a week of looking up old acquaintances, dining and lunching in their company at clubs and restaurants, doing a morning's research work at the British Museum, and getting commissions for articles, he was eager to be gone. The noise of London got on his nerves, the bustle and overheated offices wearied him.

"Let me see, didn't Travers tell me that you had got married? Looked you up, didn't he, one day?" said an editor friend when they had discussed new work over a cigar.

"Yes; I've been married more than a year."

Nugent left London that night. He hesitated as he took his ticket. Should he change his mind now and look in at Wraxton Priory on his homeward way? It would not mean much detour. He hesitated again, wavering, indecisive, and then took his decision swiftly and went straight down to Ashstock and back to his cottage.

There were two letters awaiting him from Lois

Liddle, none yet from Sareel. He read them eagerly. There was a new note in Lois'. He detected it after a few lines. Was it discouragement? Perhaps she was beginning to see that her early optimism was mistaken. Depression seized hold of him and struck her fangs deep. He smoked and walked by day, and smoked and thought by night. Then he wrote to Lois as he had never written before. He opened his heart to her, and showed her its bitterness. It was a veritable *cri de coeur*, welling out of him in a great torrent of unhappiness and loneliness. He was sore and heart-sick by reason of his waiting, by the failure of his visit to town as a means of cheering him, by his torturing doubts and fears. He felt as though there were no more fighting powers or resistance left in him. He wanted Sareel on any terms now, and yet his instinctive hatred of compulsion sealed his lips from asking her to return. He felt the stinging sense of failure in his very bones. The old life was impossible; underneath his need of change had been his determination to see if he could face it again. He could not, and the new life had broken to pieces under his feet. He was adrift, and he poured out all the soreness and suffering that tore his very soul in his letter to the woman who had helped him, to the woman who he felt would at least understand, out of her own big-hearted sympathy.

All through the night he wrote, his pen slipping easily over the sheets. It was a long letter, a bit of himself—the real man—wrung out of him by

the need of confession, the hunger for a friend's understanding comprehension. He could scarcely have expressed himself so intimately to another man. He thought of Lafcadio Hearn's words: "No man, as a general rule, shows his soul to another man; he shows it only to a woman, and then only with the assurance that she won't give him away." He could trust Lois Liddle. Life, with all its dark tangles and insuperable obstacles, had at any rate given to him and Sareel the great gift of a wise and loyal friend.

He tried to say something of this to her, and told her how he failed. He ended: "I don't know whether, after all, I shall not tear this up and never send it. Maybe 'twere wiser so, and yet my impulse is to let you see what I have written. I cannot explain that impulse. I will not try. But out of the waste that life seems to me at present, the arid unlovely stretch of dreary days, this one light shines out upon me like a torch, the light that you have held, the friendship and the help that you have given. Somehow one cannot, does not seek, to thank those who give us the greatest gifts. It seems impertinence, and so I do not try to thank you. You will understand why. Some day perhaps you will be able to realise the extent of your gift. One cannot quite despair of a fate that has, in spite of all its darkness and perplexity, allowed our lives to meet and touch; out of the conflict I cling to that thought, the thought of what you have done, and more even than action, what you have been to both of us."



He posted the letter after his tramp the next day, half wondering at himself for doing so, for making so intimate a revelation even to Lois Liddle. Then he went back to his lonely home across the moor. It was September now, a day of mellow sunshine and vivid movement and song. There was the glowing magic of autumn colour and vague mist. Suddenly as he walked the sun set in a wide sky of amber light, against which the tall forms of elms and poplars stood out in velvety blackness and relief. Little clouds shone rosily in the saffron-hued sea of sky, even the straight pennon of smoke from a chimney along the road was transfigured into a radiance of soft fluctuating golden haze. The sunset light transmuted everything it touched, even the ugly roofs of the little huddled country town were caught and changed to a wonder of luminous purple, as he breasted the hill and left the houses well behind him.

\* \* \* \* \*

He met Emma Vicary on the road, trudging back from market, a heavy laden basket on one arm and a baby in the other. He took the basket, in spite of her loud protests, and they went along together for a mile and a half. She spoke as he knew she would of the absentee. At sight of Emma he had steeled himself to endure her remarks.

"It do seem as her bain't niver coming back no more, can't understand of't noways. Bad, be

her? Why for not get back to gude air and the country as give her health avoretine?"

She cast a keen glance at the man at her side; something in the set of his lips and his steady averted gaze told her that she had hit home, that it was not only illness that kept Sareel from her home and husband.

"Mebbe as her's gone fer gude and all," she said shortly; "arter all this here time as her hath a-bin away. Looks like't, I must zay, and her niver the wan to gallivant here and there like other young maidens, niver. Old woman died last night up to Farm. Did 'ee hear tull of it?"

"No." The lips set to a grimmer line still, and they walked on, Emma giving last lurid details of Mrs. Ashplant's struggle with death.

When they had to part ways and he gave over her basket, they saw a little grey creature leap out upon them from the shelter of a hedge.

"That there, Jimbo, if I dawn't declare," said Emma. "I do oftentimes tull Jamie as he'll lost of 'en so be as he lets 'en rin about all ways."

"I'll take him back with me now," said Nugent, stooping down and picking Jimbo up in his arms.

"Best ways," said Emma shortly, and she went on with her burden that she had refused Nugent's help with to her door. Jimbo nestled down against the tweed-coated shoulder in a confiding friendliness.

Somehow that night Nugent began suddenly to think of Allan Liddle. As far as possible all through these weeks he had put away from him-

self all thought of the lad who had, consciously or unconsciously, ruined Sareel's happiness. He had never once spoken to his wife a word concerning Allan. He could not, even if she came back to-morrow. The mere thought appalled him. She must know, he told himself, in her heart of hearts that he would never reproach her for that impulsive flight to Cambridge. She could not imagine that he would need to utter any word of forgiveness. His brow furrowed here with a fresh fear. Suppose that it was just the lack of that word that was keeping her away from him now? The thought was unwelcome, distressing, he tried to fling it from him. He could not bear even in a letter to speak of her old lover to Sareel. Some instinctive fastidiousness withheld him from the utterance. Yet the idea that the words must be uttered to-night pursued him, stabbed at his consciousness continually and would not be put away.

He smoked pipe after pipe, thinking. It could not be that she was waiting for his word respecting her broken, spoiled romance. Surely not. At one moment he hated the youth that had thrown aside her love like a broken flower, at another he told himself that he could never forget the debt that he really owed him, the crack of hope that let in his dreams for the future for both of them. He would wait a month longer, he told himself at last, four long dragging weeks, and then, if she had made no sign and sent no word, he would go to her and say the word of forgiveness that he shrank from uttering.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

There was only one of Lois Liddle's week-end guests remaining when she got Nugent's letter. Helen Underhill was staying on, awaiting her brother, who was expected that day. Lois read the long, intimate letter through carefully, while Helen and Denny talked together about herbaceous borders and rock gardens. As she read a determination seized the reader. She would show this letter to Sareel. She *must* show it to her. Since she had got to convince her that her husband's love was unchanged, she would do so with his own words.

She finished her breakfast and ran upstairs with the letter in her hand. She did not want to wait and think and perhaps alter her mind. Difficult matters with Lois Liddle were put in hand instantly. She laid the letter down beside Sareel's hand on the coverlet, saying briefly, "I want you to read that, every word. I shall be back again in half an hour to hear what you think of it," and she had gone.

Half an hour later she went upstairs again to Sareel's room. She opened the door, and then hesitated upon the threshold. The bed was empty, clothes were strewn about the room, and Sareel, fully dressed, was kneeling before her trunk, packing it.

"But, my child! Sareel! What are you up

to?" and she took her by the shoulders and turned her round.

"I am going back . . . to-day . . . I can't wait. I must go," said Sareel with flushing cheeks and bright eyes.

Lois threw back her head and laughed.

"Bravo! You are some hustler, as Belle Harper used to say. May I enquire how you propose going?"

Sareel had turned away again and was putting folded clothes rapidly and deftly into the trunk.

"I know you will find out for me, won't you? Is my trunk too big to go in the victoria, do you think?"

Lois laughed again at this promptness.

"How do you know that I am going to allow you to rush off in this frantic manner? Suppose I forbid?"

"You couldn't. It wouldn't matter. Don't you see I *must* go . . . now?"

"Why not send, telegraph, if you like, to Mr. Nugent and ask him to come here at once? I'll clear out everybody and leave you alone together."

Sareel shook her head.

"No. I want to go to him."

"Then you must let me send a message and tell him you are on the way?"

Sareel sprang to her feet and seized Lois by the wrist with gentle strength.

"No, don't. Let me have it my own way, just this once."

It was impossible to resist that pleading voice. Lois did not try further.

"Well, there's one gift you certainly have got, and that is getting your own way. I must fly. Helen will look out trains, and I'll get Denny to pack you some luncheon. Don't stoop any more. Hester will finish your packing all right. There isn't much time to be lost."

There was not, but Sareel got her way, and an hour later was saying good-bye to Miss Underhill and Denny.

"My dear Mrs. Nugent, your going is so sudden. Don't forget that there are two packets of sandwiches, the one tied with blue ribbon is the tomato and egg, the other cucumber and brown bread. I do hope there will be no confusion."

Helen Underhill gripped her hand in a boyish frank manner. She had come to learn something of this beautiful young wife's story in these three weeks under the same roof with her.

Lois was going on to the Junction. There was no concealing the happiness in Sareel's eyes.

"You certainly do look remarkably better, most remarkably, be sure you don't forget—the packet with white string contains the cucumber and brown——." Denny was left on the doorstep still talking and waving farewell.

They did not talk much on the way, the two good friends. At the Junction Lois saw to everything.

"I've got you a first class, because I had so much of Mr. Nugent's money that I did not

know how else to get rid of it," she confessed.

Sareel scarcely heard her. She was all impatience to be moving, to be really on the way. Lois saw that and understood.

"What a mercy you said good-bye to Dr. Tugwell last week," she said, "or I could never have taken the responsibility of letting you rush away like this."

Sareel smiled.

"I'd have gone through all the same," she said in a confident voice that defied contradiction; "nobody could prevent me . . . now."

Lois's eyes were a little misty as she went back alone. She was glad that Jim Underhill would be there when she got home. The house would seem so strangely empty without her visitor. But the thought of the coming reunion sent a warm glow to her heart. There had been moments when she had despaired of its ever becoming reality, days when she was frankly pessimistic. She could not dream that Robert Nugent would blame her now for betraying a confidence; she could not give her deed that name, and called it instead "sharing a truth."

Sareel arrived at Exeter in good time to catch her connection. Lois had arranged her journey quite clearly; unused as she was to travelling alone she found no difficulty. When she got to Ashstock it was to repent of her reiterated promise to Lois to hire a conveyance. However, she tried to keep it, but found there was none to be hired. There was a local wedding a few miles

away which had engaged every conveyance in the neighbourhood; so she had to walk and was nothing loth. She left her trunk in the charge of a porter, to send across the moor by a cart the next morning, and set out.

The fresh pure air was very invigorating after a railway journey. She felt as she climbed the hill that she could easily walk twenty miles instead of the three that lay between her and her home. Her heart was singing within her as she turned westwards. The first glimpse of the moor burst in all its wild beauty and unchallengable spaciousness before her eyes. Tors and slopes and grey hoary boulders were all mellowed to one shining irradiated serenity, under the evening purity of light. Much as she had longed for it during these months of absence never until this moment had she realised all that its meaning had been, the blank that had been left in her soul by her separation from it. She threw back her head and took a deep draught of the keen air that seemed to blow the last remnant of doubt and unhappiness finally and certainly away from her no longer troubled mind. She had come back to her inheritance, with its sky above her, her feet upon the dear earth once again. It gave her back bounteously, in full measure pressed down and running over, all the strength that had been temporarily withheld. She stretched out her arms to it with a sudden instinctive gesture; then she walked on with the sunset glow upon her face, its light within her eyes, and in her heart peace and



joy, as one who reaches a mother's breast after dark hours of loneliness and separation. Verily, in a double sense she had come home out of the darkness and chill of the valley of death and humiliation into the light and open air under God's heaven once more.

As she turned the last bend of the hill the cottage came into full view. The western windows were flashing back triumphantly the last low rays of the declining sun. She stopped for an instant to watch the little homely dwelling that now held all her happiness for the future, all her dreams and hopes, and nothing any longer either of fear or of dismay. Then she hastened on, pushing open the little wicket gate and hurrying up the narrow path. The outer door was locked, but she knew she could get in at a window. She managed it easily. Jimbo jumped from her chair and came mewing to her skirts. She stooped and caught him up, looking eagerly about her. She knew that Bob could not have been long away. Here were all the evidences of him, his pipe by his chair, yesterday's paper on the floor beside it, his slippers by the fireside. She sat down, her eyes wandering from one object to another. She smiled, there was dust on the mantel-shelf and over the books. This was not the way that she had kept house. A peat fire smouldered low on the hearth. She turned the slabs over, and kneeling blew them to fresh life with the bellows. They glowed red and caught up quickly. She put aside her coat and hat and set the room tidy, then she laid tea

and went upstairs to smooth the tumult of her hair.

She could wait now, well content, for his return. She came back to her low stool by the fire, now burning well. Jimbo jumped to her lap as in old days. Her thoughts flew back to them and her first days in this low ceilinged, book-lined room. She remembered her husband's care of her, his gentleness and consideration, her own blindness for so long. She grew impatient for the sight of him, the sound of his deep level voice, the quick impetuous laugh, and the flash of fire that turned his eyes into those of a boy for brief instants.

Outside the last sunset cloud grew to a deeper orange, and then was invisible on the pale evening sky. The stillness and darkness of night came creeping swiftly over the vacant moor, a little wind rose at sunset and went crying among the tors, stirring eerie echoes, rustling among the heather bells and about the dried gorse blooms.

The sough of the wind made Robert Nugent shiver, that homeless, desolate sound that he had been used to declare made his cottage home so desirable a shelter by contrast. A snatch of verse that he had lately come across repeated itself over and over in his listless tired brain:

"Empty as life done  
Or love away."

That was the emptiness of his present life, the desolating, unremitting solitariness of love away.

The phrase teased his sore heart with a pricking stab of pain at every step, it was like a knife blade in his breast. Then he had one of his old dreams—if he might but cross the threshold of his home and find her waiting for him as in old days! He thrust the thought from him with a resolute will. That way lay madness. He must not yield to its seductive sweetness, he must not destroy himself with anodyne such as it offered him; better the lonely reality that he could face and endure than the paralysing opium of a disordered fancy. Not for him yet the welcoming joy of her eyes, the peace of her presence, her face, and shelter from the cold and heartache of long months apart. Perhaps never again. His heart gave a leap of ungovernable fear. He stumbled along with his thoughts, his head thrust forward, so that he did not see the flickering firelight across the casements, the light that lit up the interior and showed that waiting figure by the hearth.

He went with heavy steps up the cobble-stoned path and unlocked the door. He opened it and passed inside. But on the very threshold his movements were arrested, his steps held, while little icy tremors clutched at his brain bewilderingly. She was there by the fire, just as he had pictured her a thousand times, sitting exactly as his mind had drawn her, with bent head, the shadow of her hair dark against her cheek, the very melting curves of neck and brow, and the soft depths of her eyes. He was losing his sanity, a whirl of dazed and protesting agony swirled

through his brain, destroying thought, almost unbalancing him with its intensity. He could not make a step forward, something held him back, and kept him trembling here among the shadows. He caught at the door frame, trying to steady himself with the contact of something material beneath his touch. The same chill shivered through his veins and set a shudder through his whole being.

She was sitting watching him, smiling, neither moving nor speaking, only her clear gaze meeting his and holding it unfalteringly, with that new sweet smile making it unfamiliar to his eyes. She was dead then, out of the flesh, an insubstantial figure of the spirit world, come back to him for one short instant of what men term time. He had longed for her and his longing had reached her, traversing the spaces of life to the existence beyond the grave, and calling her by its urgency and need here to his very hearthstone once again. His eyes rested upon her reverently, tinged with that awe of the supernatural that must always spring in such moments as the present. Cold sweat stood now on his brow, his hands were trembling, his lips stiff, refusing to utter the cry that seemed frozen there.

Then she moved and held out her arms to him with a sound, half sob, half strangled inexpressible joy.

"Bob! Aren't you glad to see me, glad to have me back? Bob!"

In two strides he reached her side, and kneeled

at her feet. He caught her hands in his and covered them with kisses. His eyes devoured her, and she did not shrink from his ardent, burning look of almost incredulous joy. For some minutes he still could find no words with which to greet her, no phrase to tell her of his joy. He could only lean toward her, keeping her hands still held securely in his own; looking his fill into those clear and shining eyes, with a look like a star in their grey depths, a new light such as he had only dreamed of finding in them some day, a look that told him, without any need of clumsy stumbling words, the stupendous dizzy truth.

She had come home to him for the first time like this, with steadfast eyes and smiling tremulous lips. He put his arms about her and drew her close, her head on his breast, his lips against her hair. For some tingling moments neither spoke nor stirred; while life raced through their veins like quicksilver, trembling with joy unutterable at this exultant certainty between them.

After a long interval he kissed her lingeringly, her eyes, her hair, her mouth; still without a word spoken, but with all things said that either needed. At last she laughed under her breath, a little laugh of protesting happiness.

He released her from his arms and got up.

"Poor, hungry child! You must be famished. Sit still. I'll never forgive you if you dare to move. I'll make tea."

She lay back in the chair as he commanded, watching him; the fire's dull red glow revealed

the new lines on his lean sunburnt face, the fresh threads of grey in his abundant hair, and the light like a flame in the eyes that could not keep themselves long from hers.

The meal was ready, he drew the table close to her chair and sat on the stool at her side. She poured tea and handed him a cup. He stooped and kissed the fingers holding it. "It'll spill. There! now, see!" They ate and drank and spoke little, although neither later could have told what was eaten, drunk or spoken, during the meal. Gradually the blue dusk, that had been like a third friendly presence, died from the glimmering squares of the casement, and velvety darkness looked in upon the pair; the peat fire was now one intense glow that shone upward, striking on the two faces turning ever to one another, the eyes that sought each other's searchingly at every instant.

Sareel moved and sat up.

"There is something I must say to you. I ought to have said it first of all."

He wished desperately that she would not try to explain, that she would not trouble with any words this first perfect moment of reunion. He had always hated explanations upon lesser matters; upon this they were profanation. There was no longer any need of them, no longer any meaning.

"My child, why try and explain the inexplicable? Only be content that it is ours and do not spoil the joy of it by any crude explanation that

always leaves unsaid what one would wish. Let it be."

She shook her head, there was dissent in her eyes. He saw now something in her face that sent further words from his lips.

"Please, let me! Just this once, and then never . . . again," she urged in a low, insistent voice.

"Surely never again," he said, and he held out his arms to her.

"Not yet . . . hear me first." Her mouth quivered, so that he had to turn away his eyes for the pity of it, and her indomitable remorseless will.

"I've never really seen things . . . and myself, until just lately," she began quickly with nervous haste. "I have been very blind and dull . . . always. But these last weeks it all came clear to me and I was . . . afraid . . . so afraid."

"Poor child!" his eyes caressed her.

"I didn't see how you could ever forgive me."

"Forgive!" he laughed below his breath at the ill-fitting word.

"I saw what you had to forgive . . . then . . . at last. I didn't think, when I went that day of anything or anybody but myself and . . . Allan."

"Don't"—he put out his hand to her with a protesting gesture.

"Yes; I must say it all just this once. I was blind, as I say, and a fool. I had to fight through before I could see the way . . . your letter to Lois showed it me really . . . this morning. You are not vexed with her for letting me read it?" she turned to him with a new fear in voice and eyes.

"I am not vexed with anybody or anything at the present moment, except with you for inflicting this . . . confession upon yourself. It isn't worth it, child. Let it rest for both our sakes."

She went on as though she had not heard the ending of his sentence, her eyes on the red flameless glow of the fire.

"I don't want you to think that I come back and bring to you something that . . . he would not have . . . flung away."

He made no further effort to stop or interrupt her words; slow, halting words that came from her inmost heart, wrung from her by her need of truth between them. He sat back in the shadows, his eyes on her face, changing and quivering with the emotion of the moment.

"At first, I thought only of what you would be likely to think of me. I was afraid. I felt sure that you must have lost all faith in me, I seemed to have lost it in myself. Until this morning I never dreamed that I was to you what your letter said. I dared not hope for such a revelation. I knew then that if you wanted me, and your letter made me see you did, nothing else in the world mattered, or could matter. I knew that I must come, and chance my being able to make you see the truth. Whatever happens I am glad I came, even if I have to go again because of what I have to tell you."

She turned to him then, waiting for his protest, and almost fearing when no word was spoken.

"I never wished before to-day to be able to put



things into words so that they are not spoilt, so that they make another see, as Lois can. For I want to tell you what cannot be told. I want to show you that this . . . love in my heart for you has nothing to do with that other"—she hesitated and then hurried on—"I can't. I don't know how it will sound to you, or what difference it may make, but I must speak the truth. The . . . feeling I had for Allan Liddle has not gone"—he started here and would have spoken, but she hastened on—"I think perhaps because I am one who cannot really change. I see and know now how I cared for you differently from the first and never knew. What Allan meant to my life he means still. I don't want to see him again, there is no need. Oh! I can't make you see. I knew I could not. Perhaps you will say that I can go away again if what I have spoken is the truth—and it is."

She was looking down at Jimbo through mist of tears. "I had to say it. On my way down to-day I was thinking of what I had to say to you, and I thought that my first . . . love was like a sort of rare flower, that is picked just once in a lifetime and pressed and treasured ever after. But this in my heart toward you is bigger, far closer to life than that, like the flowers we love all about us and never grow tired of, something that changes life like the sun and is . . ." She broke off helplessly: "I can't—words spoil it all," she said, and her slow tears dropped on to the grey fur in her lap.

The stumbling words ceased at last. She fell on her knees beside him. He lifted her.

"Don't kneel to me, child. How do you know that after all you have not made me see?"

He drew her to his breast. She buried her head against his shoulders, still shaking and sobbing low under her breath. He murmured words of love, low in her ears, whispers that stilled at last those heaving sobs, and kept them silenced.

"Closer," he said, and she crept nearer into his arms. He bent his head again over hers. The long firelit room grew more shadowy, its books and furniture swallowed up in the invading darkness, dispelled only in the circle by the fire whose glow shone on the two figures, silent, content in the first moment of reunion.

After a long interval his fingers moved over her hair, stroking its tumbled masses with gentle movements that dropped to her cheek and lingered there caressingly. She caught his hand and laid her lips against it passionately. His own eyes grew misty, and something between a laugh and a sob choked in his throat. His arms tightened about her. They were silent again and motionless.

At last she spoke.

"You haven't smoked since I came."

He fumbled with one hand in his pocket for pipe and pouch.

"Don't move"—but she had sprung away with her quick movement, and twisted a paper to light his pipe. The flame fell across her face as she

bent toward him. He lit up and she flung the paper aside. He held out his arms to her again.

"Now that's the beginning and end of explanations between us for ever and ever. Amen. I didn't want to hear it and yet I bless you with all my soul for telling it me. Words are clumsy, but not when in our heart shines the greatest revealer of secrets that humanity can ever know. As long as we have got that, the way is clear. It has been pretty dark and hidden of late; but I am not going to spoil to-night even by thinking of it any more."

Half an hour later he put her from him into the long chair across the hearth, pulling out the rest for her feet, as on that first day of her life beneath his roof.

"Now I am going to lay the marriage feast, the first real one for both of us, eh?" He still smoothed her hair lingeringly. "I'll never forgive you if you don't promise to lie there while I get it. To-morrow you shall do as you like, but to-night I am master, and I forbid you to stir."

She obeyed him, nothing loth. It took some time to prepare that simple meal for two, since every time that he came back he had to stoop and touch her hand, her lips, her head, just to convince himself that she had not vanished in the few seconds of his absence, provoking her smile by some absurd statement, her laugh by some extravagant word uttered for that same purpose. It was ready at last, and they ate and drank the simple food that might have been ambrosia and nectar, or equally well dust and ashes for all that they knew

of it or tasted. Deep in both hearts glowed a happiness such as neither had ever known before, and probably would never know in like intensity through life again. He said something of this to her when the meal was done. She shook her head disbelievingly, as he knew she would. They spoke of Lois, and all that she had been to them both through these long months of separation and uncertainty.

"Did you guess that she would show me your letter?" asked Sareel suddenly, after an interval of silence.

"I suppose in my secret heart I must have. Anyhow, I was wise enough to leave the doing to her . . . and you. I'd have written it months before had I ever dreamed of its success."

"I shouldn't have been ready then, perhaps. I was blind so long, you see, unable to find the light, stumbling, fearing, seeking."

"It has been your honesty that saved you, your power of facing sheer truth, your candour now . . . to me . . . and yourself." She laughed low at these words, not quite believing all that they implied. "It is your greatest gift, and it has brought you back to me," and he caught her to him once again. "Pray God it keep you with me to the end."

"Nothing else seems possible," she whispered, "now;" but with life running high in their veins the end was so shadowy and distant beside this vibrating, palpitating moment, beside their nearness and communion, that to neither was it credi-

ble for a single fleeting second. Life saw to that, life and the compelling power of passion in their hearts, burning clear and steady like a flame in sunlight, straight and true, with the courage and intensity of a pure emotion battled for, striven for, and won at last out of the tangle and perplexity of the strange mysterious web of fate.

THE END



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